



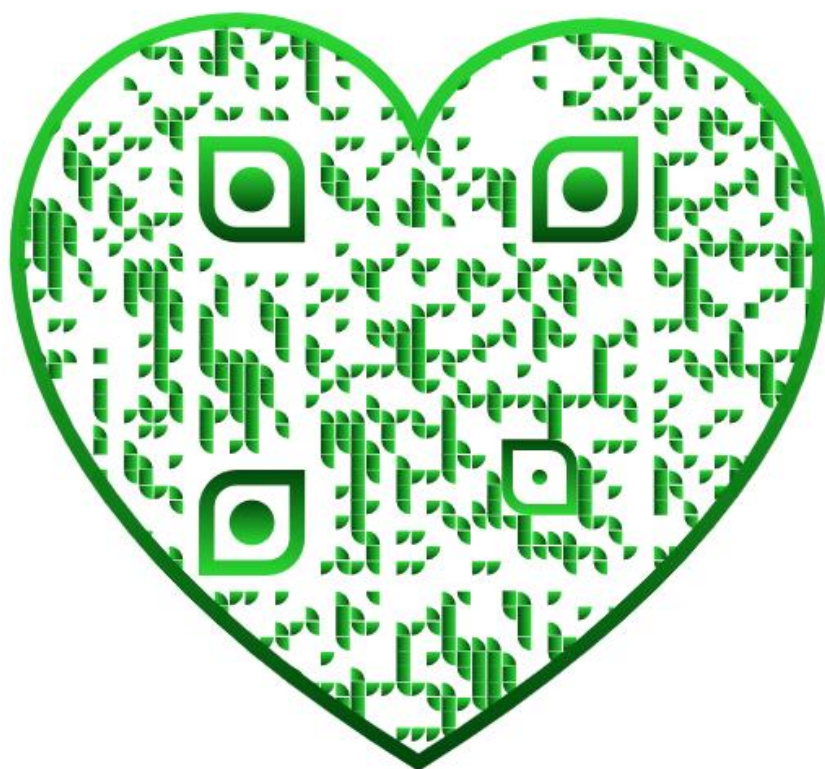
ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 4 Founder of the Royal
Academy's So-Called
Library Committee Vol. 9

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





The illustration depicts a young girl with long, flowing blue hair and large, expressive yellow eyes. She is wearing a vibrant red dress with a wide white collar and a large white bow at the neck. She holds a long, ornate sword with a golden hilt and a silver blade. Behind her stands a man with long, straight blue hair and a serious expression. He is wearing a blue coat with a large, ornate golden collar. The background is a soft, ethereal landscape with floating white particles and faint, glowing lines. The overall style is anime-inspired with detailed character design and a magical atmosphere.

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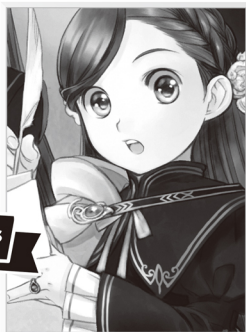
Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Three:

Rozemyne was exceedingly busy after becoming a noble, with her work as the High Bishop and the archduke's adopted daughter having left her with very little spare time. She finished the printing press, sold karuta and playing cards in the castle, and made steady progress in her aim to proliferate books. The atmosphere became a lot more tense when Georgine visited, however. Wilfried fell victim to a political trap, and Charlotte was kidnapped, during which Rozemyne almost died of poisoning. Rozemyne was soaked in a mire to recover, but when she awoke, two whole years had passed.

Rozemyne

The protagonist. After growing a little, she now looks like an eight-year-old, but she still hasn't changed on the inside. She will do anything she can to read books in the Royal Academy, which she is due to attend as a third-year come winter.



Ehrenfest's Archduke Candidates



Wilfried

Sylvester's oldest son, Rozemyne's older brother. Soon to be a third-year at the Royal Academy.

Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister. Soon to be a second-year at the Royal Academy.

Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.



Rozemyne's Guardians

Ferdinand

Sylvester's half-brother and Rozemyne's guardian.

Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.

Florescia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.

Karstedt

The commander of Ehrenfest's knights. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira

Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

**Rihyarda**

Head attendant. An archnoble who cared for Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.

**Lieseleta**

Angelica's little sister and a sixth-year apprentice medattendant.

**Brunhilde**

A fifth-year apprentice archattendant.

**Hartmut**

An archscholar and the new High Priest. Otilie's son.

**Roderick**

A third-year apprentice medscholar. Gave his name.

**Philine**

A third-year apprentice layscholar.

**Cornelius**

Karstedt's son and an archknight.

**Leonore**

A sixth-year apprentice archknight.

**Judithe**

A fourth-year apprentice medknight.

**Damuel**

A layknight.

**Angelica**

A medknight. Lieseleta's older sister.

Rozemyne's Retainers**Otilie**

Hartmut's mother and an archattendant.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Ella.....Personal chef.

Hugo.....Personal chef.

Rosina.....Personal musician.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Eckhart.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus.....Ferdinand's head attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Oswald.....Wilfried's head attendant.

Aurelia.....Lamprecht's wife.

Nikolaus.....The son of Karstedt's second wife.

Matthias.....A fifth-year apprentice medknight in the former Veronica faction.

Laurenz.....A fourth-year apprentice medknight in the former Veronica faction.

Grausam.....Giebe Gerlach.

Veronica.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Gabriele.....Veronica's mother. A former member of the Ahrensbach archdual family.

Heidemarie.....Eckhart's late wife.

Nobles Elsewhere

Anastasius

.....The Sovereignty's second prince.

Hildebrand

.....The Sovereignty's third prince.

Eglantine

.....A member of the Klassenberg archducal family.

Lestilaut

.....A sixth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

Clarissa

.....A sixth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger.

Heisschitze

.....Ferdinand's (self-proclaimed) ditter comrade.

Adolphine

.....A member of the Drewanchel archducal family.

Georgine

.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Datlinde

.....A sixth-year archduke candidate from Ahrensbach. Georgine's daughter.

Letizia

.....An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach.

Sergius

.....An archattendant from Ahrensbach. Ferdinand's retainer.

Raimund

.....A fourth-year apprentice medscholar from Ahrensbach. Hirschur's disciple.

Lower City Merchants

Benno.....Head of the Plantin Company.

Mark.....Benno's right-hand man.

Damian.....The guildmaster's grandson. Joined the Plantin Company.

Lutz.....A leherl of the Plantin Company.

Otto.....Head of the Gilberta Company.

Corinna.....A seamstress for the Gilberta Company.

Gustav.....Guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild.

Freida.....Gustav's granddaughter.

Leise.....A chef working for the Othmar Company.

Zack.....A smith. Comes up with ideas.

Heidi.....Ink craftswoman.

Renate.....Otto and Corinna's daughter.

Knut.....Otto and Corinna's son.

Other

Fran

.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Zahm

.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Nicola

.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Monika

.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Gil

.....In charge of the workshop.

Fritz

.....In charge of the workshop.

Wilma

.....In charge of the orphanage.

Lothar

.....Works in the High Priest's chambers.

Ymir

.....Works in the High Priest's chambers.

Egmont

.....A blue priest.

Kampfer

.....A blue priest.

Konrad

.....An orphan. Philine's little brother.

Dirk

.....An orphan. Delia's little brother.

Delia

.....Rozemyne's former apprentice attendant.

Bertram

.....A child of the former Veronica faction.

Lily

.....A gray shrine maiden who gave birth to Egmont's child.



Gunther

Myne's dad. Gate commander.



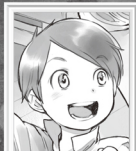
Effa

Myne's mom. Dyer.



Tuuli

Myne's older sister. Hairpin crafts-woman.



Kamil

Myne's younger brother.

Lower City Family

Temple

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Prologue

“I pray that you live well with the divine protection of the gods until Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves the threads of our fates together once again.”

“Indeed. I pray that her weaving is smooth and swift.”

Georgine climbed into her carriage with a smirk, then left with the rest of the Ahrensbach caravan. Traveling along their flanks were members of the Ehrenfest Knight’s Order, who would be accompanying the group until they exited the city.

Even after the carriages faded into the distance, Florencia couldn’t shake Georgine’s final smirk from her thoughts, nor could she forget the “We will meet again soon” she had chosen as her farewell. Her hands went from being clasped together politely to completely white-knuckled as a shiver ran down her spine.

Truly, what a discomforting smile.

During her previous visit to Ehrenfest, Georgine had given her mother Veronica a similar smile while visiting her in the Ivory Tower. The hunting tournament had followed soon after, during which nobles had deceived Florencia’s son Wilfried into entering the Ivory Tower himself. After hearing about the nobles who had moved to save Veronica and the series of events from her son’s perspective, Florencia couldn’t help but feel that Georgine was responsible—that she had been pulling the strings in the shadows all along. Naturally, she had not a shred of proof, but she couldn’t shake the fear that something else was going to happen.

Even Sylvester is on guard...

Florencia looked to her husband, who had been keeping a very close eye on Georgine for the duration of her visit. He had treated the woman with what could only be described as superficial politeness—in stark contrast to how he behaved with his other older sister Constanze, who had married into Frenbeltag. It had taken Florencia by surprise during their last visit.

Knowing that the carriages were out of sight served to lower Florencia’s guard at least somewhat, but before she could so much as exhale, Rozemyne turned to Sylvester. “What was the urgent summons they received from Ahrensbach?” she asked, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Don’t know,” Sylvester replied, waving away the question. “It

came from the border gate. I even read it myself, but all it said was that they need to return at once. Something must have happened that they don't want us to know about."

From the border gate...?

Florencia gulped on instinct. Emergency messages to members of an archducal family visiting another duchy were traditionally sent via water mirrors, which only archdukes could use. In other words, it was safe to assume that Aub Ahrensbach wasn't in good enough condition to use one.

To think that everything would go as Lord Ferdinand predicted...

Back when Sylvester had attempted to stop the forced marriage, Ferdinand had apparently informed him that Aub Ahrensbach would most likely collapse during the engagement period. He had noted that his source wasn't particularly reliable, but even then, Sylvester had put his faith in Ferdinand without question.

Florencia had assumed that the warning was simply to convince her husband to agree with the forced marriage and stop him from asking questions. Aub Ahrensbach had seemed in good health when she last saw him at the end of spring during the Archduke Conference, and the fact that Georgine and Detlinde had come to Ehrenfest meant that he couldn't have seemed sickly before they left.

"We're moving to the meeting room," Sylvester instructed, prompting the Ehrenfest higher-ups who had come to see off Georgine's group to move to the archduke's office. There, they would begin sharing the intelligence they had gathered during Ahrensbach's stay.

Florencia shot Sylvester a sideward glance as he started escorting her. *Is he feeling well...?* Upon hearing about the royal decree, he had raged against the king for giving his order without hearing the thoughts of all those involved, his half-brother for accepting without asking his opinion as the aub, and the nobles of other duchies who had been manipulated into doing Ahrensbach's bidding.

I can only hope that Lord Ferdinand's engagement proceeds without issue.

Ehrenfest was a low-ranking duchy without any means to defy a royal decree. Florencia wanted things to go peacefully, but at the same time, her heart was a storm of unease.

"So, what have we learned?" Sylvester asked, beginning the meeting.

Those attending began exchanging intelligence acquired from tea parties and meals that Georgine and her retinue had attended. The bulk of participants in meetings like this were usually men, but today, there were a great number of women as well. The two visitors were women of the archducal family; they had gone to many girls-only tea

parties, where Florencia and Elvira had taken the lead with intelligence gathering.

If possible, I would have liked to speak with Rozemyne and Charlotte before this meeting to organize everything we know...

Georgine had left the task of accompanying Detlinde entirely to Ferdinand, instead focusing on her own socializing. As a result, Florencia had needed to delegate one job after another to the noblewomen she could trust—leaving her with almost no time to speak with her children. Most notably, she had yet to receive a detailed report on their gathering in Ferdinand's estate. Given that the meeting had been about purchasing a hairpin, it seemed wiser to ask Rozemyne or Charlotte about the matter than Wilfried. Florencia listened to Elvira's report while forming a schedule in her mind.

"We can infer much from Lady Georgine's departing smile, but I believe the tea parties and meals she attended during her stay will prove more important," Elvira said, having fully devoted herself to gathering information at Ferdinand's request. "During tea parties attended mostly by those of the former Veronica faction, she would explain how Lord Sylvester is seen as a cruel and terrible archduke by other duchies, and she regularly asked for everyone's thoughts on Lord Ferdinand becoming her daughter's husband. She also seems to have learned about books and printing. Most nobles of the former Veronica faction believe that Lord Ferdinand is behind Lady Rozemyne's trends, so I imagine that Lady Georgine thinks the same."

Investigation had revealed that many of the former Veronica faction believed that Ferdinand was creating Rozemyne's new trends from the shadows. Only now that Veronica was gone was he able to see the light of day, they had said; he had clearly taught his secrets to a former blue shrine maiden to secure her adoption by the archduke. They believed that Rozemyne was being exploited so that Ferdinand could secure power in Ehrenfest.

If only they were closer to her, they would immediately see the truth—that Lord Ferdinand is desperately containing Rozemyne's rampages.

Ferdinand already seemed to know what the nobles thought about him. He nodded at Elvira and said, "Indeed. Detlinde even asked me how many of my personal craftspeople I intend to bring when I move to Ahrensbach as her groom."

"How did you answer?"

His response here was crucial. It was hard to imagine that Ferdinand would do anything to harm the duchy, but it wasn't rare to bring one's personnel along when leaving one's duchy through marriage. The number of craftspeople he decided to take with him would have a considerable impact on trends moving forward.

Ferdinand acknowledged the countless eyes on him, then scoffed.

“I said that I would act with Ahrensbach, the greater duchy, in mind.”

There were two very distinct ways in which this answer could be interpreted: “I shall bring as many as is appropriate for a sizable greater duchy” or “I shall follow Aurelia’s example and bring only the bare minimum.” Given his sardonic smile, it was likely that he had meant the latter, but that was an issue in itself. Ahrensbach intended to take Ehrenfest’s trends through this marriage, so bringing fewer retainers risked damaging his relationship with the duchy and promoting his poor treatment there.

Lord Ferdinand was chosen specifically for his administrative skills, so this is far from being a normal marriage...

Florencia wasn’t the only one worried about Ferdinand’s future; Elvira and Rozemyne were no doubt even more concerned.

“Would it not be wise to have more cards to play, if necessary?” Elvira asked. “Perhaps you could bring some craftspeople with you...”

“No,” Ferdinand replied, refusing the idea outright. “The king did not order me to bring craftspeople, so there is no need. We do not know how commoners might be treated in Ahrensbach, and they would serve only as dead weight as I would need to devote some of my focus to protecting them. Ehrenfest craftspeople need only work for Ehrenfest.”

Florencia sighed at this obstinate response; it wasn’t unusual for Ferdinand to reject the good-natured suggestions of others, but as always, it was hard to keep up with him.

Nobody knows what might happen in Ahrensbach.

Florencia decided to report what she knew. She wanted Ferdinand to put at least some thought into protecting himself.

“Bear in mind that I acquired this information from a laynoble of the former Veronica faction, but... as Ahrensbach plans to return Lord Ferdinand to Ehrenfest once their duchy has stabilized, it seems they are more or less stealing him for his mana and administrative talents.”

“Come again?”

“It may not be the most reliable news—it was stated during a meal attended only by the core of the former Veronica faction, so this laynoble did not hear it themselves—but I find it most curious nonetheless.”

Everyone furrowed their brows. Given the current state of Ahrensbach, it was clear that it wouldn’t stabilize anytime soon.

“But who knows how long that’ll take?” Sylvester said, crossing his arms with a confused frown. “What must Georgine be planning to have said something like that?”

Ferdinand was drumming a finger against his temple, wearing a similar frown. “The meaning of those words changes greatly depending on whether they mean stable from an outside perspective

or stable from Georgine's point of view. Not to mention..."

He fell silent.

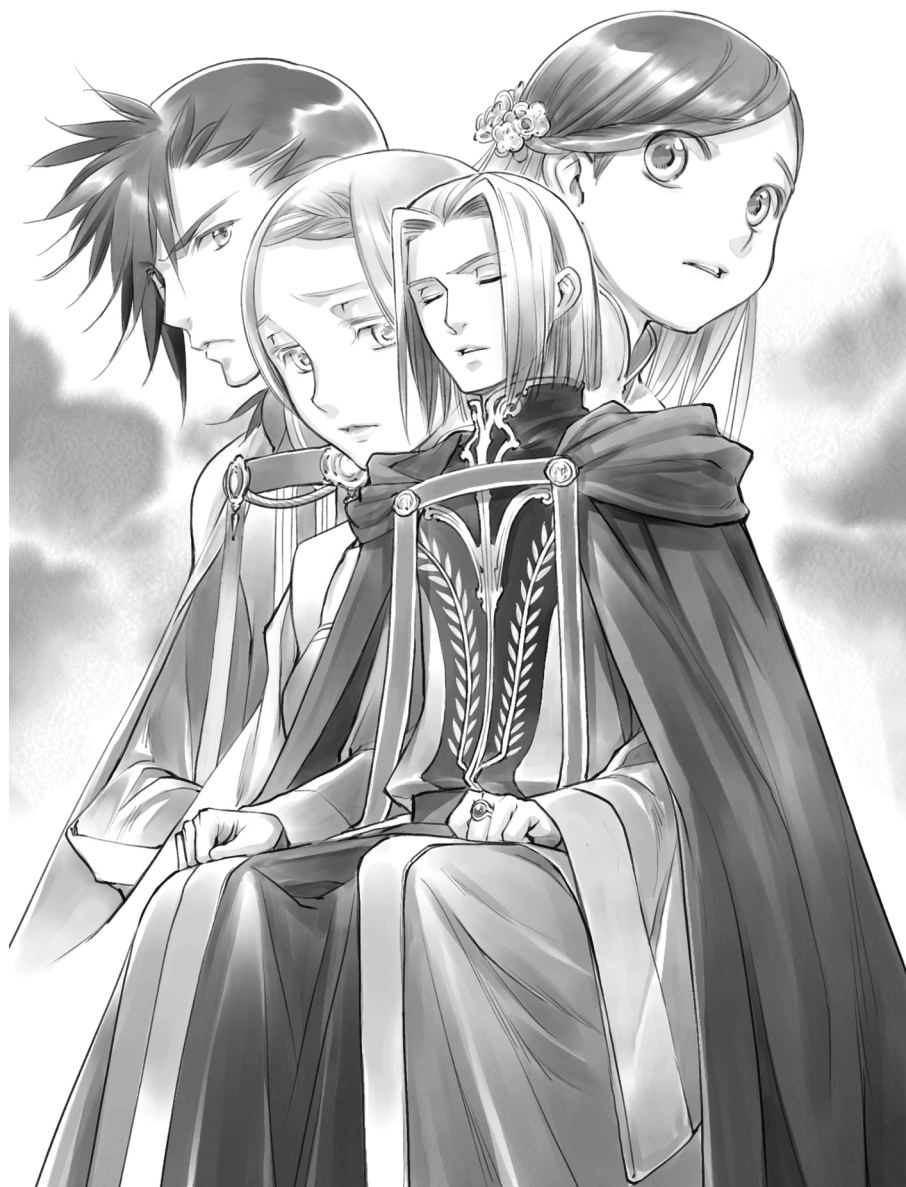
"Not to mention what?" Rozemyne asked. She was prompting him to continue, but he merely shook his head and said that it was nothing.

Florencia saw no need to question Ferdinand any further. Although he was a cautious man who said only what he was confident was the truth, if something of great importance was on his mind, he would report it anyway with a preface that he wasn't sure about its veracity.

Rozemyne was different, however. She glared up at him, determined not to let him avoid the matter, and said, "No secrets. We need to consider every possibility here."

It was true that Ferdinand's insight would be of great use, and for that reason, everyone joined Rozemyne in imploring him with their eyes. He grimaced but spoke nonetheless.

"I simply thought that, in the first place, I am unlikely to be alive by the time they would send me back," he explained, causing the air in the room to freeze over.



“D-Don’t scare us like that!” Rozemyne exclaimed.

“I wanted to stay silent. You are the one who forced me to speak, no?”

“True, but...”

Rozemyne was stiff with fear—and in this case, Florencia wanted to agree with her. It was wonderful that Ferdinand was clearheaded enough to consider the worst-case scenario, but he was so objective and dry in his delivery that one started to wonder whether he truly understood what might be in store for him.

“This is just my opinion,” Florencia began, hoping to cut through the tension in the room, “but Lady Georgine’s socializing with the former Veronica faction seemed to be shallower than the last time she was here. They socialized in many regards, but their discussions were empty, and even giebes close to Ahrensbach returned to their provinces before long. I consider this disconcerting. Was all this because they knew we were observing them?”

According to the reports from their moles in Georgine’s meetings, although the conversations held no substance, the fire in Georgine’s eyes had burned more ferociously than ever. Florencia couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable about the hastiness of the smile that Georgine had given before leaving.

I must hear the thoughts of my children after this...

Georgine had engaged only in surface-level socializing during her stay in Ehrenfest, but there were reports from all over stating that Detlinde had acted quite openly. Perhaps she had leaked some of Georgine’s thoughts and intentions at Ferdinand’s estate. Once their meeting in the archduke’s office had concluded, Florencia sent her children invitations to a tea party.

“Welcome, Charlotte.”

“I assumed that we would speak soon, so I was overjoyed to receive your invitation,” Florencia’s daughter said, then looked around the room quizzically. “Oh, am I the only one here? Did you not invite Wilfried or Rozemyne?” Melchior would still sometimes speak his mind rather than respect the flow of the meeting, so she had chosen not to list his name. Their conversation continued with this silent understanding.

“I did, but they both declined,” Florencia replied. “Wilfried’s training as the next archduke has begun in full now that Lord Ferdinand is due to leave for Ahrensbach, and Rozemyne must return to the temple at once to prepare Lord Ferdinand’s successors and study for the Royal Academy.”

Ferdinand regularly helped Sylvester with his administrative

duties and assisted the archducal family in place of the retired Bonifatius, and the question of who would take on this workload and supply mana in his place was of grave importance. Rozemyne and her retainers could manage work in the temple, but for the castle, they would presumably need to bring Bonifatius out of retirement or have Wilfried provide some assistance—on top of getting Sylvester to take his own duties more seriously, of course.

“Wilfried is being trained to be the next archduke...?”

“Indeed. He reported that the trip to Leisegang went well and that he had successfully earned the support of their faction. Elvira likewise said that he made no errors of note, and even Rozemyne maintained that the meeting with Giebe Leisegang Emeritus went well. Did you not agree with them?”

“Yes, but the bar is set lower for Wilfried than anyone else. Our praise for him is tied not to any substantial accomplishments, but simply to the fact that he did not commit any grave errors. For most others, not causing serious problems is a given, yet we commend my brother all the same. To be frank, I did not sense a dramatic change in Giebe Leisegang Emeritus’s intentions,” Charlotte explained with a frown, tightening her grip on her teacup. From her perspective, the Leisegang nobles had demonstrated not that they would support Wilfried as the next aub, but merely that they accepted Rozemyne’s refusal to take the seat herself. “Now that Rozemyne’s intentions are clear, I cannot imagine they will oppose Wilfried becoming the next archduke, but...”

“But he did not earn their support. I see.”

Florencia had a distant look in her eyes. There was a significant difference between supporting someone and not actively opposing them, but Wilfried didn’t seem to understand this. Florencia believed that he was far too optimistic and oblivious to his surroundings, and that was her speaking as his mother; an objective third party would not be anywhere near as kind in their criticisms. It was hard to say whether he remembered the revitalized nobles tricking him after Georgine’s last visit—or whether he understood what was happening at all.

Florencia sighed. “Can you tell me what occurred while you were at Lord Ferdinand’s estate? Much like with your trip to Leisegang, I feel that your interpretation of events will differ considerably from Wilfried’s. To begin with, what manner of person was Lady Detlinde?”

“What did Wilfried say?”

Florencia hesitated for a moment; Wilfried had praised Detlinde as being “kind, just like Grandmother.” He had apparently found it moving when she had tried to grant her attendant’s wish to meet with her older sister. “Well, he said that she... was very much like Lady

Veronica.”

Charlotte smiled, having noticed the distinct pause in her mother’s response. “Oh my. I share that opinion as well. She was very much like Grandmother.”

Although they were using the same words, Charlotte’s opinion was the complete opposite of her brother’s. Wilfried was very much like their father in that he had grown up being sweetly doted on by Veronica, whereas Charlotte was more like their mother, having been neglected to the point that it was hard to believe she and Wilfried were both Veronica’s grandchildren. To nobody’s surprise, Florencia didn’t view the woman very favorably either.

“Should I take that to mean she is exceptionally cold to those she dislikes and possesses the natural arrogance of one who expects her every selfish desire to be granted...?”

Charlotte met this question with a broad smile before taking a sip from her teacup, evading the need to directly state her thoughts. Florencia returned to her tea in response, feeling heartened. Her daughter had grown much, perhaps due to having socialized with nobles from top-ranking duchies in the Royal Academy.

“Lady Detlinde expressed dissatisfaction with the idea of Uncle picking a hairpin for her,” Charlotte eventually said. “Furthermore, she seems to have some fixation on Lady Adolphine, who is due to marry the first prince.”

Charlotte’s report started to make Florencia’s head ache; Sylvester wasn’t the only one worrying about Ferdinand getting married into Ahrensbach. Was it possible that Ferdinand had some kind of plan to ensure that everything would go smoothly?

After all, he accepted the king’s decree without so much as consulting Sylvester.

“Speaking of which,” Florencia said, “Wilfried informed me that Rozemyne abandoned socializing with Lady Detlinde to focus on reading.”

“Yes, that was at my suggestion. It seemed a wiser move than risking any conflict developing between her and Lady Detlinde.”

Florencia blinked in response to this explanation; the most she had been told was that Rozemyne had gleefully retreated to the book room.

“Rozemyne and Uncle are so close that they share attendants in the temple,” Charlotte continued. “They are like family, so I can only imagine Rozemyne would resent Lady Detlinde upon finding out how much she demeans Uncle and Ehrenfest. That is why I determined it would be safest to have her read instead.”

“They share attendants?” Florencia asked. She had never gone to the temple herself, so she had not realized they were *that* close.

“Indeed. Uncle did not have enough attendants to host so many visitors, so he brought some attendants from the temple. I was surprised to find that Rozemyne’s were among them, but her retainers were unfazed. It seems that this sharing of attendants was similar to when we borrow Rozemyne’s attendants for religious ceremonies.”

This was the first Florencia was hearing about Rozemyne letting her siblings borrow her attendants. Her approach to things truly was abnormal, even if she did carry herself as a proper noble now.

“Uncle personally trained Rozemyne’s attendants in the temple, according to her retainers, and he assigned his most competent attendant to her as an advisor. I found it strange that Uncle continues to serve as Rozemyne’s guardian when she’s been adopted into the archducal family, but it started to make more sense when I found out that he had raised her in the temple before her baptism.”

It was generally accepted that Ferdinand was responsible for Rozemyne. Sylvester prioritized Florencia’s opinion when it came to raising their children, but for Rozemyne, he would always prioritize what Ferdinand thought. She had always found it quite telling that not even Elvira could interfere, despite having acted as Rozemyne’s true mother since the girl was baptized, but she was still surprised to learn just how close Rozemyne was to Ferdinand.

“Uncle has been serving as a pillar of emotional support for Rozemyne all this time, so I am concerned about how she will cope moving forward.”

“Oh my. But this is a good opportunity for her to leave his nest and become independent. She just needs to start depending on Wilfried instead.”

“I am not sure he is capable of such a role...” Charlotte muttered. Her voice was tinged with concern, but the unavoidable fact was that Wilfried and Rozemyne were engaged—they would need to become pillars of support for each other no matter what. The decree for Ferdinand to marry into Ahrensbach had certainly introduced some urgency, but they would have needed to start depending on each other either way.

That said, for that to happen, we will need to have them spend more time together.

As far as Florencia could tell, Wilfried was already relying on Rozemyne, perhaps because she had already saved him before his debut and during the Ivory Tower incident. In contrast, Rozemyne had declared that she no longer intended to babysit her fiancé unless there was some risk that he might be disinherited.

Judging by her behavior, Rozemyne didn’t intend to do anything for Wilfried outside of what Ferdinand explicitly instructed. This lack of consideration wasn’t on purpose, however; it was more likely that

she just didn't devote much thought to him. It was a feeling that Florencia understood well. Rozemyne wasn't often present in the castle, so at times, her existence slipped from Florencia's mind entirely. In fact, Rozemyne appeared at the castle so infrequently that Florencia was often taken by surprise on the occasions when she joined them at the dinner table.

In short, Wilfried and Rozemyne needed to be more conscious of each other before they could even begin to develop a mutually supportive relationship.

"I understand your concerns, Charlotte, but we should not keep Rozemyne from socializing for our own benefit. She will need such experience as Ehrenfest's future first wife—doubly so if she's already lacking in that area."

Rozemyne's limited socializing skills could also have been remedied by Wilfried taking a second wife who could deal with such matters, but that was much easier said than done. The Leisegangs would start causing trouble unless the woman he married was one of their own, but giving more power to the Leisegangs was ill-advised—especially with the planned winter purge. Factions were going to be changing far too much.

"If possible, I would like for Rozemyne to leave the temple and start getting more socializing experience, but I know she will not be open to the idea," Florencia said, punctuating her complaint with a long sigh.

Charlotte narrowed her indigo eyes in reproach. "You expect too much of her, Mother. She is going to be running the temple almost entirely by herself once Uncle is gone, which will no doubt mean spending even more time there. She is both the High Bishop and the orphanage director, you know, and on top of all that, everyone expects her to spread the printing industry to other provinces and come first-in-class within the Royal Academy. We certainly cannot expect her to socialize within the duchy as well. At the very least, please wait until she grows more accustomed to life without Uncle."

As much as Florencia could tell there was an extremely tight bond of trust between Charlotte and Rozemyne, she couldn't understand what had caused Charlotte to be so considerate of the temple.

Florencia already knew from Sylvester that, to Rozemyne, the temple was somewhere she could meet with her family under the guise of discussing the printing industry. Having her regularly return home or Elvira frequently visit the castle would only result in people assuming the worst, but the temple was free from the prying eyes of other nobles. Of course, Charlotte didn't know about these secret circumstances, and Florencia had no intention of revealing them to her.

“Rozemyne will benefit more from being trained into a proper first wife,” Florencia said. “I understand that religious ceremonies are essential to the running of the duchy, but could she not entrust her daily tasks to blue priests and visit the temple? At least that way she will only need to attend ceremonies, as you and Wilfried currently do. She will only be the High Bishop until she comes of age, after all.”

Florencia had received reports that there were significantly fewer blue priests than usual, but also that there were plentiful gray priests to support them. It was hard to imagine there being any significant problems with Rozemyne spending less time in the temple; surely there wasn’t much work that she explicitly had to complete herself.

“Training her to be a first wife can wait until she has come of age,” Charlotte replied, disagreeing. “Father is still young and healthy, and it will be a long, long time before Wilfried comes to power. As far as I am concerned, we should worry less about Rozemyne and more about training Wilfried. Perhaps we could start by replacing his retainers again, since our previous changes clearly did not suffice.”

“Replacing his retainers again...?” Florencia repeated, blinking in surprise. She had been aware that her son’s growth was waning due to his focus on Royal Academy grades above all else, but she hadn’t thought it was so severe that replacing his retainers needed to be considered.

“His current ones have grown more and more arrogant since the engagement was settled. I feel as though I have returned to the time when Grandmother was in power.”

It seemed that Oswald was forcing Charlotte to yield many of her achievements to Wilfried, so that all the credit would go to him and he would be propped up further. Such behavior was unacceptable, but Wilfried remained completely oblivious to it. Even when Charlotte had attempted to subtly inform him, he hadn’t picked up on her indirect language.

“I tried my hardest to tolerate this, as you asked me to form strong bonds with my brothers so that I might rely on them after being wed to another duchy, but the burden is growing too great to bear. A single arrogant order is bad enough, but Oswald demands more by the day. I no longer wish to assist my brother whatsoever.”

Florencia could feel a strong headache coming on. She understood the joy that Wilfried’s retainers must have felt knowing that their lord had overcome two grave threats and returned to his seat as the future archduke. They must have been overly eager to get him more achievements to his name, for his sake—or perhaps they only knew Veronica’s methods and thought it obvious that all others should remain completely subservient to the next aub. Either way, Wilfried no longer had a tyrant shielding him. Treating Charlotte so poorly that

she refused to assist him entirely was a terrible move.

“I will investigate this at once, and if you are correct, I will relieve Oswald and the others of their duties,” Florencia finally said.

Under normal circumstances, Oswald should have taken responsibility for both Wilfried’s lack of education prior to his baptism and the Ivory Tower incident. He had been allowed to retain his position only because Rozemyne had supported the idea of putting Wilfried’s peace of mind as a young child first—and also because nobody else had wished to become his retainer after the Ivory Tower incident.

Florencia was confident that Oswald got along well with Wilfried, but if Charlotte was telling the truth about his growing arrogance and focus on teachings not suited to the new, post-Veronica Ehrenfest, then his position would need to be reconsidered. It wouldn’t be hard to replace him now that Wilfried was set to be the next aub, and as that thought came to mind, Florencia was once again reminded just how much Ehrenfest was changing.

“Wilfried is old enough to be emotionally ready for a change of retainers,” Florencia continued, “and he surely understands the danger of retainers acting independently and causing issues.”

Charlotte paused for a moment and then said, “Indeed. He seemed confident in his declaration that the Leisegangs have given him their support. If you instruct nobles of their faction to join as his retainers during the changes, then perhaps he will come to understand reality a little better.”

Charlotte’s tone was uncharacteristically harsh; she must have been so frustrated about Oswald’s methods and the fact that Wilfried was failing to notice them that her feelings had finally boiled to the surface.

“You must have suffered a great deal, Charlotte. Thank you for informing me.”

Since children lived in the northern building with their retainers, there were many things that their parents couldn’t pick up on by themselves. It was important to have a relationship of trust so that problems such as this could promptly be addressed.

Of course, Charlotte’s frustration with her brother was only one of many concerns preying on Florencia’s mind—interduchy relations were changing due to Ferdinand’s engagement, Georgine’s disquieting smile seemed indicative of some danger on the horizon, Sylvester was still passionately against the king’s decree, Wilfried wasn’t able to judge people or their relationships, and Rozemyne was hiding away in the temple to avoid socializing. In the face of so many challenges, the most Florencia could do was sigh.

Rewarding Hartmut's Hard Work

After our visitors from Ahrensbach departed from Ehrenfest, I worked toward advancing my studies for the archduke candidate course under Ferdinand's supervision. Time passed in the blink of an eye, and before I knew it, the summer coming-of-age ceremony had arrived. I finished it without incident while Hartmut "babysat" me. It was actually kind of scary seeing him with a look of such complete satisfaction. All in all, the ceremony was more than enough for me to resolve to learn to do everything myself so that I wouldn't need his help anywhere near as much in the future.

The autumn baptisms came soon after, and a meeting was held about the Harvest Festival. One key topic of discussion was which blue priests would be going where. It was a task that Ferdinand would normally deal with himself, but as he was busy preparing documents for his successors, Hartmut and I were doing it instead.

"The Harvest Festival, yes?" Hartmut asked. "I wish to travel with you, Lady Rozemyne."

"Don't be ridiculous. You have your own duties to perform as a blue priest, Hartmut. You obviously cannot accompany me."

"I am aware, but that is still my wish. Otherwise, what reason was there for me to have remained behind during Spring Prayer and focused on learning tax work? Ngh... I was a fool!"

Oh yeah. He stayed at home last spring and said that he'd accompany me in the autumn as a tax official.

The Archduke Conference had taken place after this Spring Prayer, and that was when Hartmut had been assigned to take over from Ferdinand as the High Priest. I understood the disappointment of knowing that one's hard work had ultimately been for naught, but I had grown tired of his impassioned speeches.

"I wished only to burn into mine unworthy eyes the sight of you baptizing the common folk, performing their coming-of-age ceremonies, and binding their stars all at once. How I yearn to once again experience Groschel, where the sparkles of great blessings and stunned awe on the faces of the commoners gave way to eternal praise for your works, and..."

Something tells me we're going to be here a while...

Still, no matter how annoying he was being now, I was certain that he would adopt the role of a future High Priest to perfection

when it came time to hold the meeting with the other blue priests and depart. I placed a lot of trust in his talents... but I still wasn't interested in hearing his various complaints and excessive praise for me.

"Fran, Zahm, let us put Hartmut aside and focus on preparing a list of which blue priests we can potentially send out."

"Understood."

I ignored Hartmut as he continued his incomprehensible speech and instead returned to the task at hand. We were going to be sending the blue priests who took their jobs seriously to the locations with the biggest harvests. Years of this had apparently led the blue priests of the former Veronica faction to start doing a bit of work themselves.

Once our list was complete, I asked Hartmut and Zahm to deliver it to the High Priest's chambers. "Assuming he approves, all we need to do now is announce our choices during the meeting. You will be in his chambers preparing to succeed him henceforth, right, Hartmut? Best of luck."

Thankfully, Hartmut had given up on his speech and joined our discussion the moment serious talks began. He had a bit of madness inside him, but all things considered, he was a very diligent person. It was also important to consider that he had only lost the chance to accompany me because he had volunteered to serve as the next High Priest. He was working hard for my sake, so it only seemed fair to reward him.

The problem is that I don't really know what Hartmut would want. His last request was for a coming-of-age blessing, so...

I racked my brain for ideas, thinking back to all the times I remembered seeing him happy or excited.

Hm? Um... Huh. How strange. Is it just me, or did all of these events have something to do with me?

From an objective point of view, his obsession was creepy to the point of being deeply unsettling. Far from rewarding him, I wanted to put as much distance between us as physically possible.

Nah, nah, nah. I assume there's just a side of this I'm not seeing. I'll ask someone closer to Hartmut about it; I'm sure they'll put my mind at ease.

I was only familiar with the "retainer" side of Hartmut, but he had a more private side as well—as proven by the fact that he had started dating Clarissa without my knowing. There were bound to be many other things he liked; I just wasn't aware of them.

Cornelius might have an idea...

I turned to Cornelius. Apparently, he and Hartmut had been socializing since before their baptisms, since Elvira and Ottilie were both family and close friends.

“Cornelius, does Hartmut have any interests other than me?” I asked, staring up at him in anticipation. “I am conscious that he isn’t able to accompany me for the Harvest Festival, despite having so diligently learned tax work on top of his various other duties as my head scholar and the future High Priest, so I wish to give him a reward of some kind. The problem is that nothing comes to mind...”

He fell into thought for a short while, but then his expression became one of complete despair. “I... apologize for not being of any use,” he said, looking at me intently, “but nothing comes to mind. That said, I am once again steeling my resolve to stay on guard against Hartmut—even more so than before. I will protect you no matter what may happen.”

So not even Cornelius can think of anything...

“Philine? Roderick?” I asked. They spent time with him as apprentice scholars, so maybe they knew something. “Anyone...?”

“Unfortunately, although over half a year has passed since I first began speaking with Hartmut, I have yet to see him take an interest in anything unrelated to you...” Roderick said apologetically. It really, *really* wasn’t something I had wanted to hear. “However, Hartmut is a skilled scholar, so I must imagine he is fond of magic tools and circles.”

It was true that he had joined Ferdinand and Raimund in their conversation at the Interduchy Tournament, and the gathering spot’s healing magic circle had made him excited enough to start taking notes. These things might have been indirectly related to me, but I was sure that his interest went beyond that.

As I was deep in thought, Philine came up with something. “Hartmut wishes to become a scholar you can rely on,” she said, “so perhaps you could consult him when making magic tools or circles?”

“Can that really be considered a reward...? It sounds more like adding to his workload.”

“This is Hartmut we are talking about; I am certain he will adore it,” she said confidently and with an innocent smile.

The most I could say in response was: “I have learned so much.” I then fell into thought for a bit—at which point Damuel made a hesitant suggestion.

“This is not unrelated to you, Lady Rozemyne, but he is very interested in learning about blessings, religious ceremonies, and the divine instruments. Perhaps you could permit him to view especially precious documents?”

“That is a good idea. There are many such documents in the temple.”

Perhaps giving Hartmut the means to research blessings and the divine instruments would inspire him to lock himself away in his

hidden room like Ferdinand. Either way, it was sure to stop him from obsessing over me.

After finishing his administrative work with the High Priest, Hartmut returned to the High Bishop's chambers. I wasted no time in putting my plan in motion.

"Hartmut... do you want to try making the divine instruments?"

"You intend to give me the divine instruments, Lady Rozemyne?! If even that is within your power, then you are even greater than a saint. A goddess, perhaps? Splendid! Truly splendid! Praise be to the gods!" Hartmut exclaimed, offering a prayer. His eyes were sparkling more than ever, but his delight was entirely unfounded—I certainly hadn't said whatever he was going on about.



“No, I do not, so stop praying!” I replied, desperate to clear up the misunderstanding. “I will simply be explaining why I can make them—or, rather, the method that I use. You may be able to make them yourself, but that will depend entirely on you. I, um... I was thinking this could serve as a reward for your hard work and as an apology for you being unable to accompany me during the Harvest Festival. Does it sound acceptable?”

I was concerned that Hartmut wouldn’t actually like the reward, but he knelt before me with an exceptionally bright smile. “It is the greatest reward that I could ask for, and one that should lead to significant progress in my research.”

It seemed that scholarly things really were the best reward for Hartmut. Relieved that he hadn’t rejected my idea and demanded something strange in its place, I started explaining how I had obtained the divine instruments. It was very simple: you just had to keep offering mana to the divine instruments in the temple. Once you had supplied enough, the magic circles would start coming to mind with relative ease.

“I was able to use Schutzaria’s shield after about half a year as a blue shrine maiden. Perhaps an adult archnoble such as yourself will make faster progress, since you can use rejuvenation potions and other such magic tools already. That said, do not become so devoted to your studies that you overconsume potions or start allowing other aspects of your life to fall apart.”

“Understood.”

Standing behind the very enthusiastic Hartmut were my other retainers, also listening with great interest. They seemed excited about the prospect of learning to use the divine instruments themselves.

“This sounds like a great opportunity for me to try making the God of Life’s sword,” Cornelius said.

“I fail to see how you are involved, Cornelius; I am the one Lady Rozemyne is presenting with this tremendous gift, not you,” Hartmut noted. “Should you not be focusing on guard duty while in the temple?”

As the two glared at each other, smiling all the while, Philine noticed my concern and spoke up. “Um, Lady Rozemyne... If you permit Cornelius to offer his mana, would this not cease to be a reward for Hartmut?”

Hartmut agreed with a firm nod.

I contemplated the situation for a moment. The duchy would benefit from more people offering mana to the divine instruments, and the mana-deficient blue priests could focus on handover stuff without needing to worry about the offerings. That, in turn, would ease

Ferdinand's burden.

"I would enthusiastically welcome more mana being donated to the divine instruments, as long as donating does not interfere with your work," I said. "But in that case... I suppose I would need to grant Hartmut another reward."

"Another reward...?"

"Is there anything else you might like, Hartmut? I will provide anything that is within my power," I said, asking for his own opinion.

Hartmut pondered my question. Then, with an unexpectedly serious expression, he replied, "Please rely on me more."

I didn't follow at all. "I am relying on you more than enough already, no?" I was having him work not only as my retainer, but in the temple as well. Was there even anything else I could rely on him for?

Seeing my confusion, Hartmut regretfully clenched a fist. "My status as your head scholar is in name only. I am not doing the work expected of the position."

Apparently, scholars serving as retainers to the archducal family were meant to prepare and manage brewing ingredients and assist with the creation of specialized concoctions—all things that Ferdinand and his retainers had been doing for me up until now.

Well, now that he mentions it, Ferdinand did give me everything I needed to study for class...

"I feel that I am being useful in the Royal Academy and the temple, but I would like for you to rely on me more as your head scholar," Hartmut reiterated.

Back when Hartmut had only been an apprentice, and there hadn't been any adult scholars in my retinue, he had willingly followed the lead and instructions of my guardian, Ferdinand. Now, however, he could no longer work as my retainer in the Royal Academy. He basically wanted to do scholar work in Ehrenfest too.

"It will make things easier for Lord Ferdinand as well," Hartmut added.

"I understand your wish, Hartmut, but you're essentially suggesting that I give you more work. Would that really be a reward for you?"

"Yes," he replied at once. His eyes were sparkling so intensely that I recoiled on instinct; I really couldn't understand him.

"This does not seem like a reward, though..." I said. In essence, I was just going to be placing a greater weight on his shoulders.

"In that case, I ask for some valuable ingredient or another. Now, what will we do with it? Brew? Make a magic circle? Shall I create a list of all the ingredients you own?" Hartmut asked, once again trying to turn his reward into something that benefited me. I desperately

tried to think of another job I could give him.

“U-Uh... You could assist me in making a protective charm for Ferdinand. Do you recall how one of his charms responded to that rock thrown by the Immerdink student during the Interduchy Tournament?” I asked, rolling up my sleeve to show one of the charms that Ferdinand made me wear. “I would like to make a charm to protect Ferdinand from a similar incident, should one occur.”

Ferdinand was going into enemy territory. I wanted to give him absolutely anything that he might need to protect himself.

“I want to pack a single charm full of magic circles that will react to any attack,” I continued. “And, if possible, I want to begin working on it right away. It may require much trial and error.”

I showed Hartmut several of my designs for magic circles, which were based on the charms Ferdinand had given me. I wanted to pack them all into a single charm. Hartmut looked over my sweet little designs founded in hopes and dreams and smiled, a confident gleam in his eyes.

“I see. This is a challenge that is well worth doing. I will support you with my all.”

And so, Hartmut taught me how to make protective charms. I also decided to allow all those who wished to offer mana to the divine instruments to do so, as long as it did not interfere with their work. Of course, this soon blossomed into a competition between Hartmut and Cornelius as they both fought to see who could complete their divine instruments first. All of my other retainers started participating one after another, and soon enough, the instruments were filled with an abundance of mana.

The Harvest Festival and a Meeting

The Harvest Festival arrived seemingly out of nowhere. I was going to be using this opportunity to retrieve the Gutenbergs, as was now the norm, so after traveling through the Central District, I made my way to Leisegang. Giebe Leisegang invited me to tea while returning his chalices, then started telling me about Great-Grandfather.

“He informed me that Lady Georgine’s group stopped in Gerlach on their way back to Ahrensbach,” Giebe Leisegang said.

“Is that not to be expected, though?” I asked. “I understand that she returned to her home duchy by highbeast, but we must also account for the many carriages transporting her luggage.”

Traveling by highbeast would have been the fastest way for them to return to Ahrensbach—and the wisest, considering the urgency of their summons. I was pretty sure that Georgine’s group had been given permission to fly in Ehrenfest, but as nobles from another duchy, they still couldn’t cross the city barrier on highbeast. That was why they had initially departed by carriage, but that wasn’t to say that these carriages became unnecessary once they were outside the city; normal highbeasts couldn’t carry much luggage, after all.

“Naturally, there is nothing strange about their caravan visiting Gerlach to rest and sleep,” the giebe replied. Leisegang was on poor terms with the Veronica faction, and with Georgine by extension. Gerlach, however, got along well with Georgine, so there was nothing suspicious about her party taking a detour to stay there. “The problem is that Lady Georgine visited Gerlach *personally*, and a strange meeting apparently took place there.”

“I see. If she went there herself, not just her carriages, then this is of the utmost importance. Why has Aub Ehrenfest not been informed?”

“I was in the Noble’s Quarter for Lady Georgine’s visit and did not see her visit Gerlach myself. Furthermore, Grandfather has no evidence to reinforce his claim, so we would not be able to protest if Gerlach dismisses it as a false charge.”

It seemed that Great-Grandfather’s suspicions were mostly based on the fact that several nobles had returned to their province just before the urgent summons arrived, despite Georgine’s presence in Ehrenfest. He had also mentioned that no Leisegang farmers had seen

Georgine's flock of highbeasts flying overhead. It certainly did seem like circumstantial evidence being used unfairly, and something that might not have been worth reporting to the archduke.

"In any case, I will inform the aub as a precaution," I said.

"Though I will note the distinct lack of evidence." I couldn't tell whether Great-Grandfather was onto something or just delusional, but either way, it was good to know he was as healthy as ever.

"Thank you for your consideration."

Aside from that information of dubious veracity, we also spoke about printing. Apparently, the city of Fluss had succeeded in creating the necessary environment to start contributing to the industry.

"They can make paper now, and any paper we lack after the fact can simply be purchased from Illgner. I received a report that they are very much prepared to start printing throughout the winter," Giebe Leisegang explained. Everyone was snowed in during the winter, so printing would more or less be treated as a pastime for the commoners.

"I look forward to seeing what books Leisegang is able to produce."

I performed the Harvest Festival in Fluss, then retrieved the Gutenbergs and returned to Ehrenfest. My first course of action was to inform Ferdinand of what Giebe Leisegang had told me, then I sent a magic letter to Sylvester explaining the same.

"I suppose this is a thread that must be pulled at..." Ferdinand muttered, then summoned Justus at once.

Having seen the Harvest Festival through to the end, I promptly summoned the Gilberta, Plantin, and Othmar Companies for a meeting. There were reports about the Gutenbergs' work and the merchants from other duchies to be discussed, plus I needed to receive the hairpins previously ordered. Representing the Gilberta Company were Otto, Theo, and Tuuli, who arrived with numerous boxes. Benno, Mark, and Lutz were representing the Plantin Company, while the Othmar Company had Gustav and Freida, each with three attendants.

"Now then—the reports," I said. "How was Leisegang? I want to hear your honest opinions as Gutenbergs."

"It is clear to see why Leisegang has come to be known as Ehrenfest's breadbasket; the province is devoted to farming above all else and cares little about profit, which has made the atmosphere there very relaxed," Lutz said. "Those living there acknowledge that printing may help to line their pockets, but for the most part, they view it as a form of entertainment to carry them through the winter."

Compared to other provinces, Leisegang wasn't desperately reliant on printing being a huge success. Its land was plentiful, as one would

expect from a breadbasket, and the abundance of new materials had excited Heidi to no end. As for the province's smiths, they had quickly given up on making their own letter types and were instead electing to buy them, since the process was much too finicky for them to master.

"There are several types of wood that seem to be well suited for paper," Lutz continued, "but Leisegang does not have the time to research them, so they intend to sell the wood to Illgner to be researched there instead."

Lutz and Damian saw Leisegang's lack of merchant sensibilities as a source of continual exasperation. Time and time again, they had found themselves wanting to scream, "You could earn so much more money if you wanted to! What are you doing?!"

Gustav's wrinkled features moved into a gentle smile. "Leisegang is attached not to wealth but to completing its duty, which is exactly why its position as Ehrenfest's breadbasket has gone uncontested for so long—at least, that is what I was told once before," he noted. The Othmar Company had dealt in food for a very long time, so it had an ancient history with Leisegang. He then glanced at Benno and said, "Larger businesses must focus on more than the profit before their eyes if they wish to maintain their status long into the future."

"Gustav, how were the merchants from other duchies?" I asked. "Were we able to handle them?"

"Due to various improvements, everything went significantly better than last year. Though, of course, there are still areas in which we must improve."

He went on to explain that business with Dunkelfelger had caused a sharp increase in Ehrenfest's volume of trade and that selling the rinsham production method at the Archduke Conference had reduced demand for the product itself, causing the price of oil to settle down a little.

"Benno, what happened to the girl from Klassenberg who was left here last year?"

"Naturally, we had the visiting Klassenberg merchants take Karin and ensure her safe return home. It seems that her father is in hot water at the moment, having been responsible for his duchy losing trade spots this year."

As it turned out, the man in question hadn't expected Ehrenfest nobles to get involved with or even notice the dealings of merchants. He had apparently said to a member of the Plantin Company, "You certainly are brave to have done this to a greater duchy."

"It would have been such a wonderful marriage, yet here we are," Gustav interjected, sighing and shaking his head. "There goes our opportunity to form a strong bond with Klassenberg merchants."

Benno glared at him, then looked at me and grinned. "First

impressions are crucial, Lady Rozemyne, and our business deal with you means that the Plantin Company has a hand in all of our duchy's trends. We could not risk merchants of other duchies getting away with treating us so lightly. Doing so would impact your reputation as well." I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Hartmut was nodding along in agreement.

Next, I addressed the Gilberta Company. "Do you have with you the hairpin that we intend to give Lady Detlinde at the Royal Academy?"

"It is here," Otto replied, then turned to Brunhilde and said, "What are your thoughts?" It was only natural that he would seek her approval, as she had actually overseen the hairpin discussion while I read in the book room. She opened the box and quietly analyzed the hairpin inside.

"It matches the specifications perfectly. Well done."

"We are honored."

Otto and Tuuli relaxed their shoulders, the tension having drained from their bodies in an instant. According to Brunhilde, Detlinde's order had simply and shockingly been for "a hairpin fancier than the one Lady Adolphine wore last year."

"We mentioned that making a hairpin of the same quality as one given to the fiancée of a royal—let alone one that can be seen as even more glamorous—gave us pause," Otto said. "Lady Detlinde's attendant likewise recommended that she request a less extravagant hairpin as a show of respect to the royal family, but..."

Detlinde had refused everyone's advice with a smile and said, "I *am* going to be the next aub, you know." It was a blunt response that had seemingly left no room for any further debate on the matter.

Assuming that Detlinde did end up wearing this hairpin, it was very likely that the royal family would have something to say to Ahrensbach—and also to Ehrenfest for having made it to begin with. Even Wilfried had attempted to persuade Detlinde against her plan, arguing that a future aub needed to demonstrate restraint, but his words had fallen on deaf ears.

"That was when I offered a suggestion: she could appear even fancier by wearing multiple hairpins at once," Brunhilde revealed. Eglantine and Adolphine had each worn only a single hairpin, so Brunhilde had suggested ordering several lower-grade hairpins instead of one tremendously extravagant one, thereby allowing Detlinde to show respect to Adolphine while simultaneously appearing fancier than her. "She was satisfied with this idea, so we ordered five hairpins, as you can see. This is a solution that both appeases Lady Detlinde and eliminates the risk of us offending the royal family."

Ordering five hairpins was nothing to sneeze at. It had ended up

being quite the sum for Ferdinand to pay, but when Detlinde had pleaded for them, he had merely smiled and said, “As you wish.”

Hm... I seem to recall Father saying that the best times are those when peace of heart and home can be bought with money, and to enjoy it while it lasts.

Detlinde had also asked to use the same flowers as on Adolphine’s hairpin. Either she was holding a very serious grudge because of Adolphine’s comments during last year’s tea party, or she just didn’t like her in general. I stared down at the hairpins, which formed a gradient of red to white when lined up together, and then let out a sigh.

“I can’t help but feel that she would stand out quite fiercely if she were to put these all on at once...” I said. In truth, the idea seemed so gaudy that I wanted to stick a label on the hairpin box warning against overuse.

Brunhilde nodded with a troubled smile. “The archducal couple of Ahrensbach will give the final verdict before Lady Detlinde puts them on or leaves her dormitory, so I expect they will convince her to settle for a more reasonable number.” In other words, this wasn’t an issue for us to concern ourselves with, since the solution was as simple as putting on fewer hairpins.

“As for the other hairpins,” Otto said, “this is for the second prince, and this for Dunkelfelger.”

The visiting merchants had conveyed these orders, and the goods themselves were to be delivered at the Royal Academy. One was a new hairpin for Eglantine, while the other was a gift for Lestilaut to give to his escort.

Eglantine’s new hairpin used a white flower called a verlange, which openly symbolized Ewigeliebe’s possessiveness and meant, “I will protect you from everything, no matter what comes.” It was very in character for Anastasius to pick something like that.

Lestilaut’s hairpin for the woman he was escorting used flowers of the divine color of autumn. He had apparently attached an illustration to his order, outlining what he wanted in great detail. Tuuli mentioned that she hadn’t seen anything of the sort before, so the flowers being used could presumably only be found in Dunkelfelger.

“It must have been tremendously hard work trying to recreate flowers you have never seen before,” I said, looking at Tuuli with concern. To my surprise, however, she shook her head with a smile.

“No, my lady; the hairpin was very enjoyable to create. We craftspeople all gathered together and eagerly debated the best way to go about making it, and the finished product turned out better than expected, which came as a great relief. As you say, the flowers we were asked to use do not grow in Ehrenfest, and this particular

combination of colors is unheard of, so I was able to learn a great deal while working on this order.”

I don't know who designed this hairpin, but whoever it was has excellent taste. A true person of culture.

The next hairpin they took out was the one that Hartmut had ordered for Clarissa. The flowers decorating it were yellow, bordering on orange, which honestly took me by surprise. For some reason, I had assumed that Clarissa's birth season was summer and that she had Leidenschaft's divine protection.

“Surprising, isn't it?” Hartmut said with a subtle grin; my surprise must have shown on my face. “I also was taken aback when I first found out when Clarissa was born.”

Next, Tuuli took out my hairpin. Its design matched the divine colors of winter, incorporating a rather large red flower surrounded by smaller white ones.

“This looks adorable and very wintry,” I remarked. “I am very fond of it, indeed.”

“I am glad it pleases you.”

Once we had gone through all the hairpins, the Plantin Company delivered new printed goods. Chief among them was our first volume on Dunkelfelger's history. We were having to print it as a series, since the source material was so enormously long.

“This history book alone should keep the Rozemyne Workshop afloat for a very long time,” Lutz said.

“Indeed; there certainly is a lot to be printed,” I said, handing Roderick two copies—one for me and one for Dunkelfelger—before turning to Freida. “I was hoping to once again order some pound cake for the Interduchy Tournament; will that be possible?”

“Yes, my lady. We have the chefs and ingredients ready, as well as the rohres that you ordered personally. Cosimo.”

Freida called to one of the Othmar Company's attendants, who placed a bag on the table in one smooth motion. Brunhilde looked inside, confirmed that there weren't any issues, and then handed it to me. I grinned upon seeing the grapelike rohres that were stuffed inside.

Now I can do even more with my cooking.

“The Italian restaurant has proven very popular with merchants from other duchies, and we were so busy this summer that our heads began to spin. We are expanding our roster of chefs, and many merchants offered to hire them out. Several were quite persistent, hoping to wield their status as merchants from greater duchies, but...”

I was listed as a coinvestor of the restaurant, so they had managed to block such requests by telling the merchants to ask me first.

“Klassenberg remains very conscious of the fact that its forceful

methods have cost it business opportunities once already. As it stands, we have no reason to believe they attempted to kidnap our hairpin craftspeople or leave any merchants behind this year,” Freida reported. If my influence was keeping the commoners safe, then there was nothing more I could ask for.

“Does that mean the number of customers has begun to wane?” I asked.

“Yes. The foreign merchants have now all returned to their own duchies.”

It seemed that even the owners of major stores had come to Ehrenfest, and only now had business started to calm down. They had worked hard to get ingredients for pound cake for the Interduchy Tournament and prepare wood and such for winter.

“Now that there are fewer customers for me to interrupt, I am thinking of visiting the Italian restaurant. Ferdinand is due to leave for Ahrensbach before spring, and my hope is that we can share a meal together before then.”

“We would be honored to host you,” Freida said, her face lighting up at the very idea. “Did you have anything in mind for the menu?”

“Double consommé, but the rest is up to you. I trust in Leise’s new recipes.”

“You may count on us.”

No sooner had the meeting concluded than I extended my Italian restaurant invitation to Ferdinand. He met my suggestion with a cold stare and said, “Are you foolish? I am busy.” But it was precisely because he was so busy that he needed some good food to revitalize him.

“They have the most delicious double consommé prepared, as well as new recipes from Leise. Would you not like to indulge in some Ehrenfest cooking before you leave for Ahrensbach?”

He had already said that he wouldn’t be bringing any chefs with him, and the time-stopping magic tool we planned to send him off with would only last for as long as the situation in Ahrensbach allowed. I wanted to make sure he could enjoy as much Ehrenfest food as possible—and if we weren’t permitted to meet him, in the same way that Aurelia couldn’t meet with her family, then it was possible that we wouldn’t be able to send meals to him once he was gone.

“Consider it one of my farewell gifts,” I said.

“A farewell, hm...? I see. In some ways, this could indeed be considered an excellent opportunity. Very well, then. Ten days from now,” Ferdinand replied, setting the date with a heavy sigh.

The Farewell Dinner

I wrote a letter to Freida, conveying the date we were going to patronize the Italian restaurant. Our retainers were fighting among themselves behind the scenes, battling to see who would get to accompany us.

“I understand that you all wish to come with us,” I said, “but the Italian restaurant is in the lower city, so we cannot bring those who are underage and not permitted to go beyond the temple.”

“What?!” Judithe exclaimed.

Thus concluded the war between my retainers. Given how nonchalant they were about joining me in the temple, it was easy to forget that they couldn’t go any farther without the archduke’s express permission. Underage nobles couldn’t go to the lower city for work purposes; Cornelius had only accompanied me last time by masterfully exploiting his familial ties to Karstedt and Eckhart.

All of my underage retainers stared at me in silence—except for Leonore, who gave me a quizzical yet elegant look. “In that case, am I right to assume that you are bringing Cornelius, Hartmut, Angelica, and Damuel with you?” she asked. “Shall we call for Otilie and Rihyarda to serve you as attendants?”

“There is no need,” I replied. “The Italian restaurant was made to serve rich commoners; it is not somewhere for nobles to attend in bulk. I need only two guard knights, who can take turns to eat, and Fran to serve me.”

“Please, Lady Rozemyne. Do not be so cold,” Hartmut said, completely taken aback.

I could tell from the others’ reactions that they felt the same way, but bringing so many noble retainers with me would only inconvenience the restaurant. My retainers weren’t guests themselves, so they would need to take turns eating in the room for attendants. The problem was that this room hadn’t been designed with nobles in mind—there were no dedicated servers, and it wasn’t particularly spacious, since nobody expected attendants to bring their own staff. Arriving with my own army of retainers would only sow the seeds of chaos.

“I am willing to refer you to the store if you wish to eat there, but you must attend as customers,” I explained. “None of you are used to eating without servers, so I do not believe you would survive in the

room for attendants.”

“I do not need servers,” Damuel replied at once.

“Me neither, Lady Rozemyne,” Angelica added a beat later.

Thus, I elected to bring them as my guard knights. I already knew from Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival that they would eat without complaining when Fran and the other attendants were busy... plus something told me that telling Damuel to attend as a guest and pay for his own food was much too cruel.

“I am afraid you were too slow, Cornelius. Your only option now is to invite Leonore and attend with her. Eheheh...” I punctuated my teasing with a very deliberate smirk, but Cornelius received the suggestion with a smile.

“That is an excellent idea,” he said, then gave Hartmut a scheming look. “Hartmut, what do you think about attending as a guest rather than as a retainer?”

“It sounds like a truly splendid idea. I would rather eat alongside Lady Rozemyne than in a separate room.”

This was bad. Hartmut and Cornelius both fully intended to come with us. I would need to write to Freida to inform her of the increase in attendees.

“And if we are going as guests rather than as guards, then we can enter the lower city without being of age, correct?” Cornelius asked. “Leonore, shall we go to the Italian restaurant?”

“Why, that sounds wonderful,” she replied.

All of a sudden, my little joke about them attending as guests seemed a lot less funny. I really wished that he would exercise some restraint too, since Damuel was now being forced to endure two lovebirds flirting right in front of him.

Have some sympathy. Geez.

“Well, if you are attending as guests, do you not need your guardians to go with you?” I asked.

Leonore paused for a moment in thought, then a huge, lovestruck smile spread across her face. “Cornelius is the one inviting me, so I am sure they will permit us to go alone.”

As the conversation turned to parental permission, Brunhilde chimed in as well. “Groschel must learn more about the lower city if we are to become a trade city. After all, my own knowledge of the lower city is almost nonexistent. I shall obtain Father’s permission.”

“And as your attendant, Lady Rozemyne, I must understand your sphere of influence,” Lieseleta noted. “I can also tell my parents that this will allow me to monitor my sister. They are bound to let me go then.”

It seemed that both Brunhilde and Lieseleta were set on coming with us as well. Philine watched as they came up with their desperate

excuses, then suddenly shot her head up and raised a hand.

"You are my guardian, Lady Rozemyne. Please permit me to accompany you."

"You are my guardian as well," Roderick added. They were both looking at me with glimmering eyes—and, more importantly, they were both right. Now that they had distanced themselves from their parents, I was their guardian.

At this rate, I'm going to be bringing everyone...

It seemed that all of my retainers wanted to visit the Italian restaurant, and considering how hard they worked, treating them to a tasty meal sounded good to me. The issue was that this was meant to be my last proper meal with Ferdinand, and I wasn't sure that all this was appropriate for such an occasion. As I started to ponder the matter, I noticed that Judithe was staring at me with tearful eyes.

"Lady Rozemyne, am I going to be the only one staying home?!" she exclaimed. She hadn't been able to think of an excuse to get her own parents' permission, but excluding her now seemed much too pitiful.

"I shall contact your parents and ask for them to give their permission," I said.

"I thank you ever so much, Lady Rozemyne!"

Customers brought their own attendants to serve them in the Italian restaurant, which meant that Philine and Roderick would need people to serve them as well. They lived in the castle with me as their guardian, however, so they didn't have any attendants to bring with them.

I gazed at my attendants in the High Bishop's chambers for a moment, then said, "How about we have Fran serve me, Zahm serve Roderick, and Monika serve Philine? Rosina, I would also like for you to attend and play music for us."

"Understood."

After hearing my suggestion, Rosina and my temple attendants readily agreed to come.

"And so, we are all going to be eating together," I said.

It was the day of our trip to the Italian restaurant, so Fran and the others had needed to leave early to prepare. After their departure, I had locked the High Bishop's chambers and moved to the High Priest's room, where I was now helping him with his work while waiting with my guard knights.

"Why are your retainers attending as guests?" Ferdinand asked. "Is there any point to having them join you?"

"Well, I'm not 'having' them join me; they asked to come of their own accord. I thought this would be a good way to reward them for

working so hard. The restaurant will also benefit from having more noble customers, and my retainers' presence means more profit. Although, of course, I'm going to be paying for everyone today."

Since this was a farewell gift, I was paying for Ferdinand as well.

Ferdinand gave me a very perturbed frown. "Everyone? I would rather not have a student pay for my meal."

"I invited you, and this is a farewell gift, so it's only natural that I pay. The fact that my retainers are also going to be there is just incidental, since they're always working so hard. You're the main guest of the evening, Ferdinand."

Our carriages arrived while we spoke. Damuel and Angelica rode with Ferdinand and me, while my other retainers were taking their own carriages from the castle or the Noble's Quarter. Philine and Roderick were also coming from the castle, at my request.

"We are honored to receive your business," Freida said when we arrived, kneeling alongside several of the restaurant's servers.

We exchanged the usual greetings and then went inside, whereupon we were met with the strongest aroma of consommé, so thick that we could almost taste it. The smell alone was enough to assure us the dish was being made to perfection. I could also hear music coming from the dining room, indicating that Rosina was here already.

Freida smiled while guiding us down the hall. "Everyone else has already arrived. This is our first time welcoming so many nobles, so I must admit, things are quite tense."

"My apologies for being so unreasonable," I replied.

"Unfortunately, this was our only opportunity to do this."

The autumn harvest had just finished, and the market had more ingredients now than at any other point in the year. The livestock that had grown fat in preparation for winter was also starting to be slaughtered and turned into meat for the winter months. Compared to spring, when ingredients were hard to come by due to the recent snowstorms, and summer, when the restaurant was swamped with customers, this was the best time to bring a bunch of nobles.

"Not to mention, having my retainers stop by on their own would only inconvenience your other customers, would it not?" I asked. Most commoners wouldn't want to eat anywhere near nobles. It couldn't even be seen as an opportunity to make connections, since they weren't actually allowed to speak on their own. There was no way they would enjoy their food while being so nervous about causing offense, which was why reserving the whole restaurant and finishing our business all at once was the best approach.

"I am beyond grateful for your consideration, Lady Rozemyne,"

Freida replied. “You mentioned the other day that you were longing to eat Leise’s cooking, yes? She has been striving to meet your expectations.”

Everyone was smiling when we arrived at the dining hall; delicious food was enough to put anyone in a good mood. My hope was that Ferdinand would share in the merriment before leaving for Ahrensbach.

“Here, Lady Rozemyne.”

Fran pulled out a chair for me. He was wearing clothes prepared specially for today, and I could tell from the look on his face that he was just as excited as everyone else.

I took my seat, then listened as Freida ran us through the menu. Eckhart was standing behind Ferdinand as his guard knight, while Damuel was standing behind me. They were going to be eating second, after Justus and Angelica finished their meals.

After finishing her explanation, Freida took her leave—but not before offering us a very hospitable “Please enjoy.” In her place came various servers, all pushing trolleys covered with food. Fran brought over my plates, then Ferdinand—our main guest for the evening—was given his plates by his attendant. Everyone else was sitting in order of status, which was also the order in which they were served.

The first dish to be brought out was ham carpaccio, served with a turnip-like vegetable called zelbe. Both the ham and the zelbe were thinly sliced and arranged on the plate in a circle like a flower in full bloom. In the center was a small mountain of boiled zelbe leaves, which added a very nice splash of green. The stuff sprinkled all over it was likely rigar, the faux garlic, but crispy fried.

Decorating the delicious-looking carpaccio was some equally delicious-looking sauce, drawn across the plate in a gentle arc. They had used not just salt and citrus juice mixed with vegetable oil, as per my instructions before, but also minced mehrens and some herbs.

I took the first bite, partially to demonstrate that the food wasn’t poisoned. The saltiness of the dry-cured ham mixed well with the freshness of the zelbe, making me want to eat more. A great deal of thought had gone into the mouthfeel as well, as the crunchy rigar provided an exquisite contrast to the softness of the rest of the dish.

“The chef must have spent an extraordinarily long time on this. The sauce in particular is very different from what my own chef makes,” Ferdinand noted. He scooped up some of the sauce with his fork before bringing it to his mouth.

“Leise is dedicated to improving her craft,” I replied. “She is like you when you strive to make improved magic tools.”

Everyone seemed to be having a good time. I could hear cheery voices coming from near Philine, though she was seated so far away

that I couldn't tell what they were saying.

Our next course was the consommé that Ferdinand enjoyed so much. Making it was such a long and involved process that opportunities to eat it rarely came around. Ferdinand admired the color for a short while, then took his first spoonful.

"Is it as beautiful as ever?" I asked.

"Divine. I recall the shock I experienced the first time I tried it," Ferdinand replied, then closed his eyes to better savor the flavor. I didn't want to interrupt him, so I sought the opinions of the nearby archnobles.

"How is the double consommé?" I asked them.

"Your normal soup is delicious enough, but this is truly shocking. To think that soup like this even exists..." Brunhilde replied.

Leonore nodded along fervently. "The color is very dark, and despite it looking as though there is nothing of substance, the flavor is more profound than that of any soup I've eaten before. This dish is a baffling mystery, but I can say with all certainty that it is very delicious."

"There is so much wondrousness compressed into this tiny vessel. In that sense, this consommé is just like you, Lady Rozemyne," Hartmut added, flashing me a handsome smile. I could gather that he was pleased with the soup, but I didn't understand what he meant—nor did I really want to.

Next was a freshly baked lasagna. It must have come straight from the oven, as the cheese was still bubbling and moving about. It had already been sliced, and Fran chose a small square piece for me.

In a way, the lasagna reminded me of mille crepes—layer upon layer of pasta generously filled with meat sauce and white sauce. The contents were practically spilling out, and no matter how much Fran struggled, strings of melted cheese clung to the cutlery he had used to serve it.

"This is very hot, so take care not to burn your mouths," I said.

It seemed that my warning had come too late, as Roderick was already gulping down water. Judithe couldn't help but giggle, and she very cautiously waited for her first bite to cool down before putting it in her mouth. She wasn't quite so restrained with her second, however, and was clamoring for water herself moments later. Soon enough, both Roderick and Judithe were laughing together.

"This certainly is a lively meal," Ferdinand observed.

"Doesn't food taste better when it's enjoyed with good company?"

"To me, meals have always been a necessary evil—a means to survive and nothing more."

Ferdinand went on to tell me about his experiences as a child. Apparently, Veronica would tamper with his food whenever his father

was absent from meals—either by lacing it with a slow-acting poison or subtly changing the ingredients so that it looked the same but tasted vile. Eating in the castle had consequently become one tense event after another, with his life always hanging in the balance.

“I quite liked breakfast and lunch, but that was simply because I could eat alone,” Ferdinand continued. “On no occasion did I enjoy the food itself.”

“Your childhood was far too cruel. I would have destroyed Lady Veronica if she had tried any of that stuff around me.”

“Fool. Had you so much as laid a hand on her when she was in power, the outcome would have been very much the opposite. The first wife of an archduke is not to be trifled with.”

Ferdinand was looking at me like I was stupid, but I wasn’t going to back down. “My safety is irrelevant; I would go in prepared to take her down with me. I might die, sure, but she would die too.”

“I see we think alike,” Eckhart said.

“To think you would share such a dangerous mindset... I am glad the two of you did not meet until *after* that woman was deposed,” Ferdinand said, realizing that Eckhart and I were cut from the same dangerous cloth.

Cornelius took this opportunity to express his sympathy for Ferdinand... only to receive some very shocking news in response.

“Do you not realize that this is your problem as well, Cornelius? Once I am gone, the duty of restraining Rozemyne, Hartmut, and even Clarissa of Dunkelfelger falls to you.”

“Please do not ask the impossible of me.”

Just as Cornelius put his head in his hands, a server arrived with today’s main dish: veal cutlets that had been breaded with fine breadcrumbs mixed with cheese, and cooked in butter until crispy, making them gleam like gold.

I was already close to being full, so Fran gave me only a small portion. I squeezed some zine juice over my cutlet, then dipped my first mouthful in Leise’s special sauce that was adorning the plate.

“The zine adds a certain sharpness to the already rich flavor,” Ferdinand remarked. It seemed that he preferred his cutlet with zine, while my still-growing retainers preferred theirs covered in sauce.

“How is this sauce made?” Lieseleta asked, staring it down with a completely serious expression. “I’ve never tasted anything like it before.”

Judithe nodded in agreement, saying that she wanted to share some with her family but that her family’s chefs would never be able to make it. Incidentally, I preferred the tang of the zine as well, although I would have been even happier if we could have added ponzu sauce with grated daikon.

Once everyone had eaten the main course, the guards exchanged places. Angelica and Justus entered, while Eckhart and Damuel went to start their meal.

“You seem satisfied, Angelica. Was the food to your liking?”

“Yes. The dessert was especially delicious,” she said, which sent a wave of excitement through everyone in the room. We were going to be having Mont Blancs, with cream made with tanieh which is similar to chestnuts.

Cornelius’s dark eyes lit up when he saw the dish. “I haven’t had taniehs in such a long time,” he said. “Mother is never pleased when I order them at home.”

Several years ago, I had given Cornelius the recipe for tanieh cream as a reward for his work in the Raise Angelica’s Grades Squadron. He loved the cream so much that he had ordered as many taniehs as he could the moment they were in season—so many that Elvira had ended up scolding him for it.

“It was on my third consecutive day of ordering the cream that Mother chastised me,” he revealed. “She said the chefs were struggling with how time-consuming it was to make, and that she didn’t want to eat the same thing every day.”

It seemed that Cornelius was the kind of guy who wanted to eat his favorite foods for every meal. We had known each other for a very long time now, so I was surprised to still be learning new things about him.

“Tanieh cream isn’t particularly sweet, so I imagine men are more likely to enjoy it,” I mused.

“Indeed. But will it not seem a tad lacking for the women?” Ferdinand asked, looking at Philine and Judithe in particular. Even with pound cake, they both preferred the sweeter honey option, so they didn’t seem too satisfied with the more understated flavor of the Mont Blancs.

“Don’t worry—Leise prepared for exactly this situation,” I said. And right on cue, another dessert was brought in: rafel pie.

Rafels were a fruit that felt like a cross between apples and the softer pears grown in Europe. Some dough-based sweets already used rafels as decoration on top, but my recipe proposed cooking them first with butter and sugar.

“This is fairly sweet, Ferdinand, so I suggest you take only an experimental portion.”

He was welcome to take more, of course, but after his first mouthful, he agreed that it was too sweet for him. “That one bite is enough for me, I think.” He did still compliment its taste, though.

As it turned out, the rafel pie was most popular with Lieseleta. It was hard to tell, since she ate her portions so quietly, but she ended

up asking for seconds not once, but twice.

Farewell Gifts

“Was today’s farewell dinner satisfactory?” I asked.

Ferdinand nodded. “Yes, very much so.”

“Fran, could you bring the farewell gift? You may then leave to have your own dinner.”

Fran brought the box over at once and gave me its contents—a cute bag small enough for me to hold in the palm of my hand. I had tied it shut with some ribbon to make it look at least a little bit more like a present.

“Rozemyne, was this meal not your farewell gift?” Ferdinand asked.

“It was, but so is this. I never said there was only one.”

“I suppose not, but...” He gave me a weird look, then accepted the bag I was holding out to him. It was more customary to put things in boxes rather than bags in this world, so the small pouch in his hand must have looked truly bizarre to him. He blinked, not entirely sure what to do with it.

“Undo the ribbon,” I said. “The gift is inside.”

“Then what is this bag?”

“Well, the packaging. Isn’t it cute?”

“I am at a loss. Why in the world would you do something so unnecessary?” Ferdinand complained, furrowing his brow while undoing the ribbon. He peered inside the bag, then his expression froze as though he could not believe what he was seeing. “Rozemyne, this is...”

“A protective charm made from a regisch scale. Hartmut taught me how to make it.”

Hartmut had taught me everything I needed to know about the protective magic circles used on Schwartz’s and Weiss’s clothes—and to thank him for helping me through what had ended up being a very arduous process, I had given him one of the rainbow feystones to do with as he pleased.

“I’m sure it will protect you if you keep it on you at all times. So, what do you think? I’ve grown a lot too, haven’t I?” I said, confidently puffing out my chest.

Ferdinand flipped the bag upside down, allowing the five-centimeter-wide teardrop-shaped feystone to fall onto his hand. He channeled some mana into it and stared at it analytically. “It... seems

to be functioning properly.”

“As I said, Hartmut showed me how to do everything. I would have liked to be able to make it on my own, though.”

“You were right to seek his help. If you had made it alone, I would have been concerned about it functioning at all,” Ferdinand said with a smirk. He then looked over at Justus, who promptly acknowledged the signal and presented a slender wooden box. “And this, from me to you.”

“I thank you ever so much. May I open it?”

I was so excited that I opened the box before he even replied and peered inside. Immediately, my eyes widened in surprise. It was a hair stick—not a hairpin decorated with flowers like the kind that Tuuli made, but a proper hair stick. It was slender and metal-clad, with five rainbow feystones decorating it and chains of slightly different lengths attached to the tip.

I had chosen my largest rainbow feystones when making my gift so that I could fit as many magic circles into it as possible, while Ferdinand had chosen his smallest ones. All of the feystones here were about two centimeters in diameter. I could already picture them glittering and swaying as I walked, making for a tremendously beautiful sight.

But, wait... Rainbow feystones... That means...

I gently touched the hair stick and channeled some of my mana into it. Just as expected, this was no ordinary ornament—there were protective magic circles inside the five rainbow feystones.

“Ferdinand, this is a charm, isn’t it?”

“You are the one who said you wished to turn these feystones into ornaments, no? That would, of course, be a waste, so I made this one into a charm.”

I could definitely remember saying that I wanted to make the rainbow feystones into an ornament, but I also seemed to recall him dismissing the idea entirely. It hadn’t even crossed my mind that he might go back on those words and do something like this for me. In truth, I was more shocked than I was overjoyed.

“I tried my best to surprise you, but you’ve completely turned the tables on me.”

How could I not be completely taken aback? I had given him a rainbow feystone charm with my chest puffed out, only for him to give me the same thing times five. What’s more, my farewell gift to him was only a raw feystone; his to me was an actual ornament.

I’ve been completely and utterly defeated...

“Do not think I was not surprised as well. I did not expect you to be able to create a charm of this level,” Ferdinand said with a thin smile as he looked at his present from me. Despite his words, he still

didn't look surprised in the slightest—though he did seem kind of pleased. Although I had been defeated, he was happy, and that was all that mattered.

“Eheheh. I sure have grown, haven't I?”

“Though it was mostly Hartmut's work...”

“Details! Just compliment me!”

My retainers laughed, but Ferdinand just scoffed. This wasn't the first time he had refused to play nice. I pursed my lips in a show of dissatisfaction, then began to examine the hair stick. The rainbow feystones resembled opals, and when moved around, they seemed to change color depending on where the light hit them. There were thin metal wire frames around the feystones to keep them in place, and even these were engraved, making the hair stick look all the more fancy.

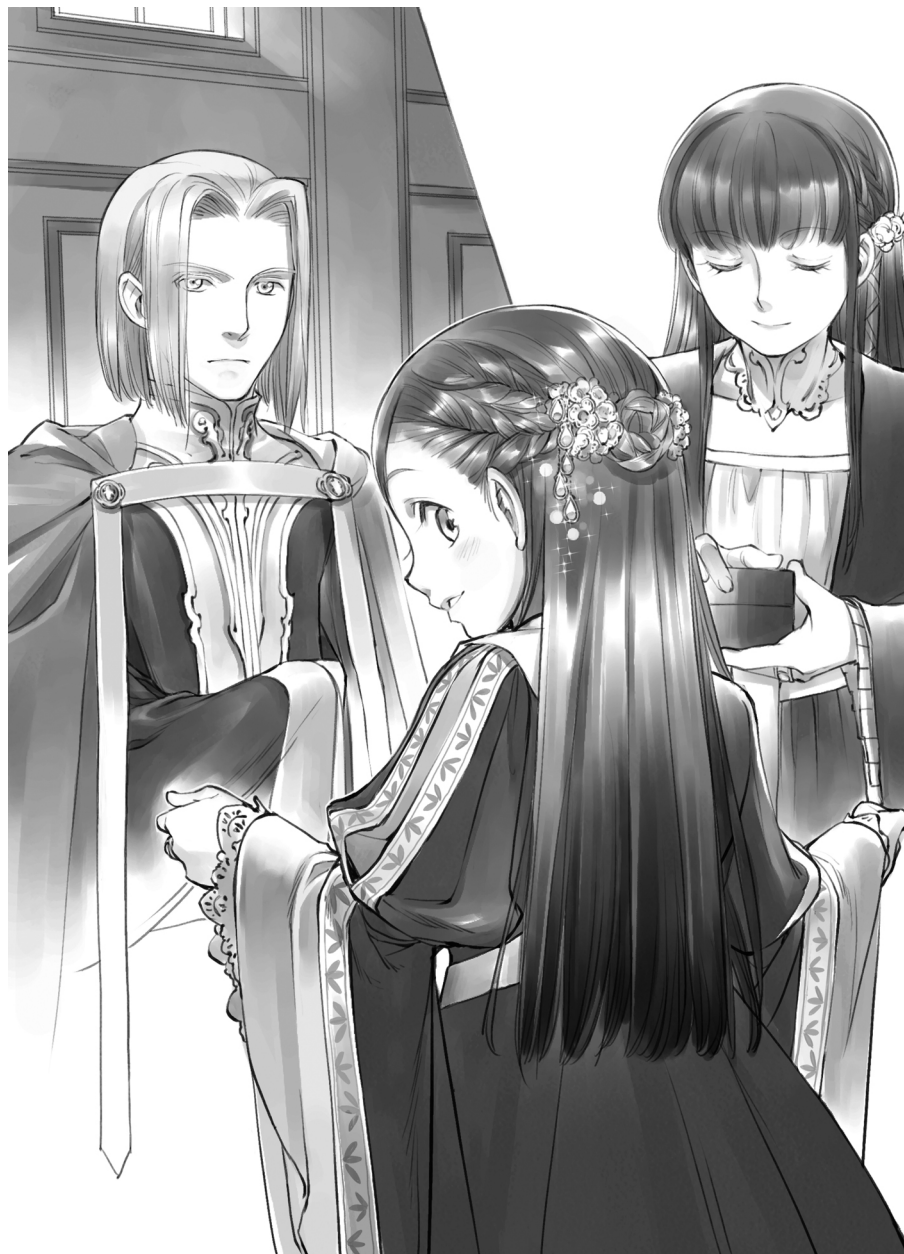
“It's a simple but attractive design,” I said. “I always knew you could pick out ornaments for women.”

“I do not want anyone to think that I picked the hairpins Detlinde ordered myself. I needed to formulate some kind of excuse to avoid putting myself at risk,” Ferdinand explained. If she had gone around saying that her fiancé had given them to her, then most would have assumed that he had chosen them himself. He wanted to avoid that at any cost; this was a dire problem that risked calling his aesthetic sense into question.

“And as for your ornament,” he continued, “while others would start to notice you wearing the same flower every day, a more discreet piece like that hair stick should draw very little attention at all. I believe that you once put forward the idea of wearing two hair ornaments at once. Utilize this technique and strive to wear this gift at every opportunity, if you can.”

It seemed that he had deliberately made the design for my hair stick simple so that I could wear it alongside a flower hairpin. He sure had thought this through. Brunhilde and Lieseleta were both nodding along, impressed.

“Lady Rozemyne, would you like to wear your new hair ornament?” Brunhilde asked, standing up and coming over at once. She accepted the hair stick from me, examined my hair for a moment, then slid it into place right next to my hairpin.



I shook my head a bit, and the rainbow feystones made a very faint clinking noise. I really was pleased with my farewell gift, and a broad smile spread across my face as I gazed up at Ferdinand. “Does it suit me?”

“It does not look bad.”

“Uh, and what do you mean by that? It sounds like you’re trying to disguise a criticism as praise.”

At times like this, I could say one thing with absolute certainty: Ferdinand was exceedingly bad at complimenting women—or at complimenting anyone, really. This was exactly why everyone said that he would never be able to keep a girlfriend.

“This is the part where you’re meant to say it looks cute, even if you don’t actually believe that,” I said.

“As they shift beneath the gentle lights, the rainbow feystones twinkle like stars upon the night sky that is your flowing hair. All who see them are sure to glimpse the love that the gods have all given you, making the hair stick perfect for a saint such as yourself, Lady Rozemyne.”

That was more than a step in the right direction—although it had come not from Ferdinand, but from Hartmut. In fact, maybe he had taken it *too* far; he had spoken in such flowery language that it was hard to work out what he was even complimenting.

“Ferdinand, even a tenth of what Hartmut just said will do. Please compliment me.”

“How foolish. I see no need to go through the trouble of voicing the obvious. I made the hair stick for you; is there any doubt that it would suit you?”

That’s not a compliment either, right? Now he’s just bragging.

It seemed wise to give up on receiving any compliments from Ferdinand, smug and cocky as he was. Instead, I turned to Brunhilde and said, “Do you think I can wear this hair stick every day?”

“Yes, my lady. As Lord Ferdinand suggests, you can simply wear it alongside a flower-decorated hairpin—and it will pair wonderfully with every single hairpin you own. That said, as a word of warning... I do believe it will stick out fundamentally due to it having five rainbow feystones,” she replied, brushing the feystones with a bemused smile.

Ah... Right. Ferdinand can be kind of off the mark at times.

Ferdinand shrugged. “There is no helping that. I can do nothing more to protect Rozemyne once I am gone.”

“You certainly are overprotective when it comes to her, Lord Ferdinand,” Cornelius said, inspecting my hair stick with narrowed eyes. “You pile her with a shocking number of charms and are using

valuable ingredients to prepare potions for her by the day.”

Hartmut scoffed. “Is it not obvious that Lord Ferdinand would devote his all to protecting Lady Rozemyne? She has been the target of Ahrensbach nobles since before her baptism, she was forced into a two-year slumber after an attack on the archduke’s castle left her poisoned, and she appears to be in constant contact with royals and archnobles while outside his influence at the Royal Academy. Not even potions and charms are enough for us to rest easy—especially when we can no longer accompany her to the Academy ourselves.”

It was then that I realized something—Ferdinand had only begun packing me with charms after my coma. Before then, he had only given them to me when we were about to go somewhere, like the gathering spots. The number of charms had continued to increase since I started attending the Royal Academy and was apparently based on how many incidents I caused.

Hartmut continued, “In fact, I would rather we give Lady Rozemyne *more* charms. Unfortunately, I am only a scholar, not her family or her guardian, so there is a limit to what I can provide.” He paused to give an exceedingly disappointed sigh, then glared at Cornelius. “Rather, why have *you* not given Lady Rozemyne any charms? You are her brother by blood. Are you not worried about her?”

“I am, but the charms she has already are so effective and of such great quality. Anything I could make for her would only be a downgrade,” Cornelius replied with a shrug. He saw no point in giving me charms when he wasn’t a scholar and couldn’t make anything even remotely as powerful as the ones I was currently using. Not to mention, even though we were siblings, my status as an adopted daughter meant that he couldn’t give me gifts freely. It was actually kind of sad hearing him describe the distance between us so clearly.

“We could act like siblings in the Royal Academy, but now that you’ve graduated, we no longer have a place for that,” I said. “I feel a little upset.”

“Me too,” he replied with a bittersweet smile.

As we were sharing in our tragic sorrow, Hartmut killed the mood with another exaggerated sigh. “Aah, I know the feeling all too well. Graduating was painful, and nothing has pained me more than the knowledge that I cannot join you at the Royal Academy any longer. Oh, why was I cursed to graduate? I could have been of even more use to you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“You certainly would be useful, but you simply wish to see what Lady Rozemyne does at the Royal Academy, no?” Leonore asked with a look of complete exasperation. “You let yourself get rather carried away during the first *ternisbefallen* attack, and when she was

regenerating our gathering spot.”

“Was that not something to be enthusiastic about?” Hartmut retorted. “Amid all that vile black sludge, she wielded the divine staff and activated the magic circles, causing the land to heal before our very eyes. She might as well have been the—”

“Hartmut, we’ve heard this a thousand times over,” Leonore said, interrupting him flatly and with a smile. He must have been something of a broken record among his fellow retainers, as Philine and Judithe were nodding in agreement. Leonore’s expression then turned gravely serious. “On a more important note, there is a request I have for Lord Ferdinand.”

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow. “Continue.”

“If you are handing this many charms to Lady Rozemyne, then you must expect her next term at the Royal Academy to be dangerous enough to require them, yes? I ask to know what dangers you expect. This way, we can prepare ourselves for them rather than having to react in the moment.”

Last year, Ferdinand had opted to give me even more charms—a decision that had coincided with the ternisbefallen attack and the rebel attack at the Interduchy Tournament, as well as the ditter game we had gotten dragged into. Leonore wanted to know what he expected to happen next.

Ferdinand gave a troubled frown. “Leonore, I did not give Rozemyne the charms because I expected those abrupt, unpredictable disasters to occur. Last year, I was simply concerned about assassins from Ahrensbach, and the difficulties that might have arisen from refusing a ditter rematch from Dunkelfelger. This year, however...” He fell silent for a moment, tapping a finger against his temple as if pondering whether his next words were wise to say, then sighed. “Rozemyne is not going to return to Ehrenfest for the Dedication Ritual.”

“What? Why not?” I asked.

“Because your other guardians and I decided as much yesterday, after much discussion. You are to spend a full term at the Royal Academy for once.”

Ferdinand went on to list their reasons one by one. Most notably, this decision was intended to diminish Sylvester’s reputation as a cruel archduke who treated his adopted daughter differently from his other children, and to accommodate the fact that the jureve dissolving my mana clumps meant I was less likely to fall unconscious.

“Last of all, we will already have plenty of mana for the ritual, since we now have Hartmut, myself, and the feystones from your time in the jureve. Of course, this will only work for this year, while I remain in Ehrenfest. Consider this your one normal year in the Royal

Academy and enjoy it to the fullest.”

It seemed that Ferdinand wanted me to have at least one term where I wasn’t summoned back to Ehrenfest for my mana. My eyes grew warm, and an indescribable sense of delight welled up inside of me as I realized just how considerate he was being.

“Ferdinand...”

“Because we plan for you to spend such a long time in the Royal Academy uninterrupted, I expect your retainers to suffer more than most can even imagine. Thus, I gifted you these protective charms. I can only pray that they ease their burden at least somewhat.”

Excuse me...?

All of my positive feelings shriveled up in an instant. Ferdinand was doing something so very kind for me; why couldn’t he just let me be moved for once?

“Ferdinand, I was emotional to the point of tears before you made that last comment,” I said, glaring at him.

Ferdinand merely nodded, unmoved. “This is not a hidden room, and my remark has saved me from having to console you. All in all, I would say this is the ideal outcome.”

“You never compliment people enough, and all the good you do is canceled out by the awful way that you phrase things! This is no good at all. You need to shape up!”

“I do not care about your evaluation of me. My attention is devoted only to the fact that your retainers are soon to experience the greatest challenge of their lives thus far.”

From there, Ferdinand turned his attention to my retainers. His statement that the next term at the Royal Academy was going to be a nightmare went completely unchallenged.

“Ehrenfest has seen rapid growth over the past few years, and the duchies we have left in our wake have grown envious—Immerdink included,” Ferdinand warned. “We do not know what these feelings will drive them to do. Our relationship with Ahrensbach will most likely change as well due to this engagement. I have prepared many potions and charms, but we must not let our guards down. Speak of the engagement with smiles, and remain alert at all times.”

In the end, he listed off so many potential threats that I wanted to ask just how many enemies we expected to make.

“You don’t need to be so worried,” I said. “This is the year I’ll make it all the way through the term without incident. I can feel it.”

“That will never happen with you,” Ferdinand replied without a moment’s hesitation, and all of my retainers nodded in agreement. This should have come as no surprise, but they really had no trust in me. “In any case, focus solely on coming first-in-class, and do not oppose any other duchies—especially the Sovereignty.”

“The thought of opposing the Sovereignty has never even crossed my mind.”

“Perhaps not, but what matters is whether *they* think you might,” Ferdinand replied, once again tapping his temple. “I expect they will approach you themselves this year, and just considering the number of things they might address makes my head ache. Can you remain quiet if they probe you about the palace library or about me, whom you describe as being like family? I do not imagine so.”

I stared at my hands, unable to argue. Now that my mana flowed so freely, I would probably enter Crushing Mode on the spot if they tried to threaten me about anything related to Ferdinand. And given all of my actions up to this point, I wasn’t shameless enough to say that I could show restraint when libraries were involved.

“I... I probably would not remain quiet.”

“Indeed. You are soon to be the first wife of an archduke and are known throughout the Royal Academy as the Saint of Ehrenfest. All eyes are on you, and your words and actions will shape the very future of our duchy... as well as my freedom and ease of movement within Ahrensbach.”

Ferdinand must have realized that, for me, his fate in Ahrensbach was a better means of persuasion than the fate of our duchy. He reached out and touched my hair stick, causing the little feystones to jingle.

“I prepared all the charms you will need, but you must never go on the offensive, whether through means such as Crushing or otherwise. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I replied with a nod, but his hard features were still tinged with concern. “You can trust me. I’ll be doing my very best.”

All of a sudden, Ferdinand narrowed his eyes and looked across my retainers. “Rozemyne, are your retainers deserving of trust?”

“I would say so.”

“Can they keep themselves from repeating that which is best left unsaid?”

“That’s something all nobles can do, no?” I asked, turning to my retainers. They all nodded in response.

“Then swear here and now that what I am about to say will not be spoken of until you leave for the Royal Academy.”

As we blinked in response to the peculiar condition of his request, Justus leaned forward and said, “Lord Ferdinand, are you certain about this?”

“If such knowledge will make it easier to keep Rozemyne safe, then I can ask for nothing more.”

Once all of my retainers had sworn on their schtappes to maintain their silence, Ferdinand gravely continued.

“The ones you must be most wary of at the Royal Academy this year are the children of the former Veronica faction.”

“But why?” Judithe asked, tilting her head with wide eyes. “We’ve been doing really well with them.”

Roderick, in contrast, squeezed his eyes shut and gave a slow sigh. “You’re doing it while we’re at the Royal Academy, then?”

“Yes,” Ferdinand replied. It was a curt response to a painfully vague question, but their expressions and the tension in the air told us everything.

They’re eliminating the former Veronica faction...

“Did you find any evidence?” Roderick asked.

Ferdinand paused for a moment and then carefully said, “Yes. There is the embezzling that Damuel discovered, among other things.”

The evidence was probably too weak to justify any definitive action, but they must have intended to proceed with the elimination nonetheless. After all, Ferdinand didn’t have much time or leeway before he needed to leave Ehrenfest.

“Once the elimination of the former Veronica faction begins, there are many children who will be accused of crimes by association,” Ferdinand continued. “Have them decide this term whether they will give their names to you. It is precisely because you have been doing so well with them in the Royal Academy that the aub has decided to protect those who give their names to a member of the archducal family, rather than punishing them all.”

Sylvester had seen the children of the former Veronica faction putting aside the usual politics and working with us in the Royal Academy. He had heard them voice their desire to come of age so that they could, at last, leave their parents’ faction. Some of them had even brought us valuable intelligence before Lamprecht’s wedding.

“The aub considers it best to dig out the seeds of danger before they take root, but he does not wish to destroy Ehrenfest’s future simply due to the crime of association,” Ferdinand went on.

“However, if we decide to waive this form of punishment even this one time, we will open ourselves to significant resistance. It is important that the children give their names so that we may spare them without incident.” He then looked straight at Roderick and said, “Ehrenfest cannot tolerate the existence of any potential threats within its borders. My hope is that you can bring as many children of the former Veronica faction to our side as possible.”

Roderick met these words with wide eyes, then nodded slowly.

“Rozemyne, if there are any promising students you wish to have at your side, do all that you can to secure their futures,” Ferdinand said. “I do not care what methods you use. This will be your only opportunity to make those of the former Veronica faction your

retainers.”

I nodded as well.

“Gah! Again, why did I have to graduate?!” Hartmut cried. “I need to be there for this! I need to! If only I had chosen the attendant course... Then, I could have gone as Roderick’s attendant!”

“If an archnoble started attending me, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself!” Roderick half-shrieked. His outburst elicited giggles and words of amusement from Philine and Judithe.

“It sure is good that Hartmut didn’t pick the attendant course, isn’t it?”

“It really is.”

“I see that nobody understands my pain...” Hartmut lamented, cradling his head in true despair.

Ferdinand put on a dark smile. “There is some work that can only be done by adults. You need only be useful to Rozemyne outside of the Royal Academy. I shall prepare something suitable for your talents.”

“And what kind of work would that be?” I asked, tilting my head.

Ferdinand thought for a moment, then scoffed. “It is better for your peace of mind that you do not know.”

Hello, police? There’s a baddie plotting something evil right here in front of me!

A Stolen Book

After finishing our enjoyable meal, we returned to the temple.

“Ferdinand, won’t the snow be troublesome when you head to Ahrensbach at the end of winter? I can’t imagine you’ll be able to transport your luggage by carriage, so what are you going to do?” I asked. He and his retinue could simply fly through the air, but there was only so much they could carry with them.

“They have already prepared somewhere in Ahrensbach for us to live, I imagine. Elvira and Lamprecht prepared space for Aurelia, and while this engagement came at such short notice, that burden falls on Ahrensbach. We will send spring and summer clothes alongside niceties of little importance now, while there is no snow to worry about, then have the aub send the rest of my luggage once the snow melts. I, myself, will depart after the Royal Academy’s graduation ceremony with little on me.”

The second trip was usually when the more valuable items were transported, and it was common for the owner to travel with them. Ferdinand didn’t have enough leeway to wait for the snow to melt, though; he needed to complete all the necessary preparations for his marriage before the next Archduke Conference.

“Would you like me to use Lessy to move your luggage to the border gate?” I asked.

“I may end up asking as much, depending on the time and circumstances. At the very least, that would reduce the risk of anything dangerous being mixed into the food or valuables,” Ferdinand muttered, turning his eyes to the horizon beyond which Ahrensbach lay.

“High Bishop, High Priest, we have been awaiting your return,” came the voice of a gate guard, loud enough to reach inside the carriage while the gate was being opened.

I started to feel strangely unsettled—perhaps due to how relieved the man seemed to sound—and fixed my eyes on the carriage door. “I wonder if something happened in the temple...”

“What do you mean?” Ferdinand asked.

“The guards don’t usually speak to us like this. I wonder if something happened that they can only report to us.”

Ferdinand drummed a finger against his temple. “If even the gray

priests serving as guards know, then that attendant of yours in charge of the orphanage surely has a report ready. Continue to your chambers and wait there. Under no circumstances are you to open the door to the carriage and ask the gray priest directly.”

I stopped leaning forward, sat back down, and straightened my back as we passed through the gate and arrived at the front entrance. Nicola was waiting there for us with Ferdinand’s attendant.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne.”

I started walking with Nicola, all the while eyeing Fran and the others who were busily unloading our cutlery, Rosina’s instrument, and such from the carriage. They would probably catch up with us before we reached the High Bishop’s chambers, so I decided to use this opportunity to probe into what had occurred in my absence.

“Nicola, it must have been a challenge having to welcome me all alone.”

“No, my lady. Not at all. Ella prepared sweets yesterday, so the most I need to do is make tea. It was more of a challenge carrying the divine gifts to the orphanage.”

Hugo and Ella had taken today off; there was no point in them being here when we were all eating at the Italian restaurant. Anything else they might have been needed for, they had prepared in advance the day before.

“Without Monika and the others here, I needed Gil and Fritz to help with lunch, which we delivered to the orphanage as early as possible,” Nicola explained. “We then ate there with the adults.”

The number of children in the orphanage had increased prior to the harsh winter. Nicola had spent much time at the orphanage and heard about the new children from Wilma and Delia, while also helping to prepare dinner for them.

“Has anything changed there?” I asked. “Are the gray priests the same as always?”

“Now that you mention it, one of Brother Egmont’s attendants came to the orphanage, which is very rare. He wanted to speak with Wilma about Brother Egmont securing a new attendant.”

Egmont wanting a new attendant immediately led me to a certain conclusion. “Has he impregnated one of his attendants again?”

I didn’t have a single good thing to say about Egmont, the blue priest who had once trashed the temple book room, and who had sent his attendant Lily to the orphanage after getting her pregnant during my two-year sleep. Nicola must have noticed my sharp tone, as she hurriedly corrected me.

“No, my lady. He wanted to take on another priest capable of doing paperwork, as Lord Hartmut becoming the new High Priest means that he has more than twice as much to do as before.”

To my relief, he hadn't impregnated another attendant after all. In fact, he seemed to be taking his new work seriously. Perhaps I was treating him too harshly because of the tragic ordeal with Lily and the sorrow she had gone through.

"We are currently unsure whether this is a matter for the current or the new High Priest," Nicola said. Both were sharing the workload during the handover process, so I could understand the confusion, but I was sure we could entrust the task to either one of them.

"Hartmut already holds Egmont in low regard due to my own distaste for him," I noted, recalling that his saint obsession knew no bounds. "Egmont is sure to receive a more favorable response from the current High Priest."

"Understood. I will inform Brother Egmont's attendant. Lord Hartmut does tend to exaggerate, but he's rarely wrong about things, so it's hard to correct him," she said with a giggle.

"How have Gil and Fritz been doing?"

"They both rushed through their dinner with the gray priests. There is printing that must be finished before winter socializing, so the workshop is quite busy right now."

This was the final stretch that would determine how many new books could be brought to the Royal Academy. They had chosen to speed through their orphanage work rather than leisurely eat in the High Bishop's chambers.

"Fran will protest if word spreads to him, so please do keep this a secret," she said. Apparently, it was normal for Fran to chastise them and say that they needed to prioritize eating in their lady's chambers and acting like proper attendants over saving time. But as she said that, a chill swept through the room.

"I can hear you, Nicola," came a voice.

"Eep!"

Nicola and I almost jumped out of our skins. We turned around to find Fran carrying a box and wearing a cold smile, while Damuel stood nearby with a hand over his mouth as he fought back the urge to laugh.

"Goodness, everything falls into disarray the moment I so much as look away..." Fran said. "Do take care, Lady Rozemyne; a lady's slovenly behavior is soon reflected in those who serve her."

He was insinuating that the current state of things was my fault, since my attendants were prioritizing work over their daily lives in the same way that I prioritized reading over mine. This was all news to me.

Nicola opened the door for me, and I made my way into my room, feeling awkward all the while. As soon as I was inside, however, a lingering fragrance caught my nose. I instinctively stopped and looked

around, but I couldn't see anything that would explain it. And soon enough, the sweet scent faded away.

"Is something the matter, Lady Rozemyne?"

"No, no... It must have just been my imagination, surely."

I turned to the side, got Nicola and Monika to help me change, then gave permission for my attendants who had accompanied me outside to change into their priest clothes. Meanwhile, I drank the tea Nicola had poured for me and gazed around the room. Something felt strangely off. I couldn't say what, exactly, but something was nagging at me.

The sensation reminded me of a time in my Urano days when my mom had gone into my book storage room and taken the second volume from a completely unorganized pile. If she had tidied them all away then I would have noticed in an instant, but such a minor change hadn't even caught my attention. I was stuck in an uncomfortable limbo, feeling like something was peculiar but being unable to put my finger on it.

What could it be...?

I continued to sip at my tea, unable to settle the discomfort swirling inside of me. Soon enough, Fran returned wearing his gray priest robe. He immediately called out to Nicola and said, "Did you enter my room while I was away?"

Nicola received his question with a look of utter confusion. "No. You were away, and there was no reason for me to. Even if a reason had existed, I cannot enter a man's chamber; I would have asked Gil or Fritz to go in my stead."

"I... see. Understood."

I noticed that Fran looked unsettled at that answer. I decided to talk to him, feeling that perhaps he shared my concerns.

"Fran, is something wrong?"

"I am sure I smelled a woman's perfume in my room."

"I, too, detected a faint sweetness upon entering. Something feels off, and it seems entirely possible that someone came here while I was absent. I shall consult the High Priest about the matter once my things have been put away and we have confirmed whether anything was stolen."

"Understood."

Fran went to fetch the key, Zahm left to report my suspicions to Ferdinand, and Damuel immediately sent an ordonnanz to resummon the guard knights who had returned to the castle following our meal at the Italian restaurant. All at once, the High Bishop's chambers had gotten extremely busy.

"You say that someone may have infiltrated your chambers?"

Ferdinand asked me with a frown.

"I performed a quick check, and it does not seem that anything is missing or misplaced, but... something is wrong. I've had that feeling ever since we returned."

Ferdinand paused for a moment in thought, during which the scholars and guard knights summoned by ordonnanz arrived.

"Lady Rozemyne," Monika said in a quiet voice, having approached while I was explaining things to Ferdinand. "Wilma is requesting an urgent meeting."

"Perhaps this is about the guard you found unsettling..." Ferdinand mused. "We will want to hear this. Let her in at once."

I nodded, permitting Wilma's entry. Her eyes shot open the moment she stepped inside, and she froze at the sight of so many men. I had thought that she would be fine, what with how regularly she had been visiting the High Bishop's chambers lately, but her fear was presumably dependent on the number of men present and whether they were near to her.

"Over here, Wilma," I said, gesturing her over to a corner of primarily women. "It must be urgent for you to have come to me now instead of waiting for your report later tonight."

She knelt before my chair, white as a sheet, her eyes flitting between Ferdinand and me. "The gray priests who were guarding the gate this afternoon have all disappeared."

The next set of guards had apparently arrived to relieve them of duty, only to find that there was nobody there. It was standard practice for there to be four guards at the back entrance to the lower city, and when carriages with business in the Noble's Quarter passed through, they would first have to state whom they had come to see and what business they had. Two of the guards would then go to open the gate, one would go to the Noble's Quarter to announce their arrival, and the last would remain at the gate with the guest. It was a rule for at least one guard to attend the gate at all times.

"This is the first time this has ever happened. Furthermore, according to the gray priests who came after lunch to take their place, the gate was not properly shut," Wilma continued. To be more precise, it had been shut differently than usual.

"In short, visitors with a carriage arrived while we were away?" I asked.

"And in secret, at that," Ferdinand added.

"Surely there is nothing secret about this," I said with an exasperated sigh. "They have taken four gray priests; that we would notice is inevitable."

Ferdinand shook his head. "Before you became the orphanage director, the gray priests in the orphanage had no way of speaking

with blue priests. In the past, removing these guards would not have been of any consequence whatsoever.”

The gray priests were formerly in a position where they couldn’t speak until spoken to, no matter how many suspicions they had. Today’s infiltrators were skilled enough to have noticed our absence and completed their task swiftly. They had employed trained methods and made it so that we couldn’t tell what was taken, even when we knew that something was amiss. According to Ferdinand, back in the old days of the temple, such foul play wouldn’t even have been discovered.

“You said that you felt only slight discomfort,” Ferdinand said. “If not for Wilma’s report, it would have faded from your mind over the course of only a few days. Such minor concerns rarely stick without something to ground them.”

He was right—it was the kind of uncomfortable feeling that I would have readily dismissed as my imagination. Had I decided to sleep on it, I was sure that it would have faded into obscurity come the very next morning.

Ferdinand frowned so deeply that his eyebrows almost met above his nose, and once again, he started tapping a finger against his temple. “I expect that our perpetrators had with them a noble with the power to make our gray priests disappear without a trace, relying on the established wisdom that nobody would even bat an eye.”

A chill ran down my spine as I recalled how Ferdinand had “disposed of the evidence” when dealing with Bezewanst’s attendants. Had the four guards met a similar fate?

Were the culprits here right now, I wouldn’t be able to control my anger.

“They must be connected to a blue priest within the temple, but not one who is aware that the person in charge of the orphanage reports to you daily,” Ferdinand said. “It would be wise to investigate which blue priests have received visitors and whether anyone has seen any carriages enter the premises. The culprit likely believes they have bought themselves time with their otherwise flawless subterfuge.”

I stood up and turned to Damuel and Angelica; I wasn’t about to let our intruders get away. “Damuel, Angelica, split up and inform the soldiers guarding the lower city’s gates. Tell them that I am searching for a criminal who infiltrated my chambers, and that I wish to know what carriages have been seen today. In fact, have them bring me all records of carriages that have entered or exited the city. I expect that Commander Gunther of the north gate will cooperate at once. This is a battle of time. You must hurry.”

“Yes, my lady!”

Damuel and Angelica raced out of the room without even the

slightest hesitation.

I returned my attention to the still-kneeling Wilma. "I am incredibly grateful for your report," I said. "Inform Gil that there has been an infiltrator. Have him contact the Merchant's Guild, as well as the Othmar, Gilberta, and Plantin Companies. I wish for him to ask whether they have seen any carriages that nobles might be riding in." The Othmar Company, in particular, was in close proximity to the temple, so there was a chance that they might have seen something.

Wilma nodded at my orders and stood.

"Furthermore, ask everyone in the orphanage similar questions," I continued. "Did they see any carriages enter while cleansing themselves or drawing water? Did they see any gray priests going to the Noble's Quarter to inform anyone of a visitor? Was anything discussed that might shed some light on the situation? Our intention is to pinpoint when these events happened. Anything will help."

"Lady Rozemyne, I will go to the orphanage as well," Philine announced, stepping forward with stationery clutched to her chest. "Wilma will struggle to ask everyone on her own, and this kind of questioning is the duty of scholars." Her grass-green eyes were focused on the task at hand, but at the same time, I could sense the worry deep within them. She presumably wanted to confirm that Konrad was safe and sound.

"Very well, Philine. Please check that Dirk and Konrad are not scared."

"As you wish."

Philine didn't see herself as being entirely detached from this situation; there was a very real chance that the same thing could one day happen to Konrad. She gave a somewhat rigid smile, then left with Wilma. Roderick, uneasy to see her go, picked up his own stationery.

"Lady Rozemyne, I should—"

"No, Roderick. You have not visited the orphanage before, so your presence there would only serve to frighten the priests. They are more used to seeing Philine. Leave this to her."

The gray priests couldn't risk speaking out of turn in the presence of a noble who was overwhelmingly higher in status than they were. As a result, they tended to maintain complete silence unless they could determine with absolute certainty that the person before them would permit them to speak and actually listen to what they had to say. Roderick being there wouldn't help at all.

"Ah..." Roderick mumbled, the blood draining from his face.

"Have I not already told you this?" Hartmut said as he picked up his own stationery. "The orphanage, the workshop, the lower-city merchants... These are Lady Rozemyne's arms and legs, and if you do

not acquaint yourself with the temple in its entirety, then you will not be of any use to her.”

“What do you intend to do?”

Hartmut grinned with confidence. “I could similarly speak with those in the orphanage, as my relationship with those there is already one of trust, but there is other work that only I can do. I must be present as the High Priest to summon and question blue priests.”

It was true that only the High Priest and the High Bishop could summon blue priests. Plus, blue priests always took a very long time to arrive and spoke very leisurely. Hartmut, whose aptitude for scholarly work was impressive even among the nobility, was the perfect man to deal with them.

“I’m counting on you, Hartmut,” I said.

“I shan’t let you down. Lord Ferdinand, I place Lady Rozemyne in your care, as I still do not know how far her influence in the lower city reaches.”

Ferdinand grimaced. “It feels as though the most troublesome duty has been forced upon me, but very well. You may use my chambers and attendants as you wish.”

“I am honored. Let’s go, Lothar.” Hartmut gestured over one of the attendants that Ferdinand had brought with him and then swiftly exited the room.

“Fran, let us thoroughly investigate these chambers to see what has changed,” I said. “Our intruder had an objective that they were desperate to achieve, even at the cost of eliminating several gray priests. We have reason to believe that your room was infiltrated as well, correct? Was anything missing or moved about?”

“I cannot imagine anything in my room that nobles would—”

Zahm raised a hand, cutting Fran short. “Perhaps they were after the box in which you store your keys. That is just about the only valuable thing that you own as Lady Rozemyne’s head attendant. In other words, it seems reasonable to assume they were after an item that is locked away somewhere.”

“We have checked once already, Lady Rozemyne, but we shall check the location where the keys are required once again,” Monika announced, then shot Fran a prompting look. He went to his room at once and returned a moment later with the storage box in question.

I was more determined to find the culprit than ever, and with that thought in mind, I stood up to once again check the bookshelves. Before I could actually get anywhere, however, Ferdinand told me to wait. “Leave what can be seen to your attendants,” he said. “You should instead investigate that which cannot be seen.”

“Like what?” I asked, blinking.

Ferdinand waved a hand. “I mean to say that, assuming our

unwanted guest is a noble, they may have set up dangerous magic tools instead of stealing anything. Search for those.”

The idea of the perpetrator being a thief was so deeply rooted in my brain for some reason that I hadn’t even considered that they might have come here to set up dangerous magic tools. A simple look around didn’t seem to reveal any new or missing things.

“Um, Ferdinand... how can I search for magic tools?”

“Spread your mana through the room like a very, very thin web. You will be able to detect any foreign items, such as magic tools filled with another’s mana, or anything with traces of mana on it. The process is similar to detecting other people’s mana within ingredients.”

The example he had chosen was something we had covered quite recently, so I knew just what to do.

“There are some magic tools that activate immediately upon detecting enough mana,” Ferdinand continued. “You will want to spread your own mana imperceptibly thin. Try to imagine diluting it with water, for example.”

“I am impressed that you know how to use mana in that way, Lord Ferdinand,” Cornelius said, having been listening in awe alongside my other retainers. “Normally, one would not have any need to carefully check for the magic tools of others.”

Ferdinand met his remark with cold eyes, then said, “There was a time when I needed to check for them quite regularly.” It was immediately obvious who had put him in such an environment, so I couldn’t help but sigh.

“Now then, if my retainers would all stand by the wall...” I said. Their mana would naturally be considered foreign as well, so it was best to have them all clumped in the corner and out of the way. Once that was done, I took a deep breath, then spread out my mana as thinly as possible. I tried to picture diluting it with water, as instructed, and started my search with the floor.

I could feel mana that wasn’t my own from my retainers by the wall, and also from Eckhart and Justus, who were standing behind Ferdinand. Even with my mana spread so thin, I could detect resistance from them. Strangely enough, I felt almost no resistance from Ferdinand, who was sitting right in front of me. Maybe I was simply used to his mana thanks to the hair stick he had just given me and all the other magic tools on my body.

Nothing on the floor reacted to my thin web of mana, so I slowly began working my way upward. Eventually, I started to feel resistance that wasn’t coming from Ferdinand or my retainers. I stared at the source and slowly approached it.

“Lady Rozemyne?” Fran asked.

I was staring at his storage box; the resistance was coming from somewhere among the many keys inside. There was something else as well, though. I gazed up at the shrine and tightly pursed my lips.

“Ferdinand... I’ve found something.”

“Tell me where,” Ferdinand said, taking out and putting on a mana-blocking leather glove as he approached.

“That bible and this key are not mine.”

It was hard to tell what exactly had changed—the items looked identical to how I remembered them—but they were registered with somebody else’s mana. Both the bible sitting normally on the shelf and the key lying so casually among the others resisted my mana.

“The bible and the key?” Ferdinand repeated. “Why in the world would they take those?”

“I do not know their objective, but I certainly know mine.”

Whoever’s behind this is going to pay.

Commoner Testimonies

“In any case, a book of mine is missing. It is only natural that I would search for it. Farewell.”

I started toward the door, but Ferdinand raised a hand. “And where exactly do you think you are going? Do you have an idea where it might be?”

“No, but I am going to use the technique you just taught me to spread my mana across the entire city,” I replied, meaning both the lower city and the Noble’s Quarter.

Ferdinand gave me an exasperated look. “You can find other people’s mana with this method, but not your own. It will prove useless in the Noble’s Quarter. Do not waste your mana, fool.”

“Ngh...”

“Instead, consider the culprit’s objective. If you can narrow down their goals, we may find ourselves on their trail.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, blinking at Ferdinand in surprise. “Their goal is obvious. You don’t even need to think about it.”

He furrowed his brow and said, “Oh?” It seemed that he didn’t quite follow.

“There’s only one reason why someone would take that bible: they want to read the only premiere edition in all of Ehrenfest!”

Had they asked me, I might have given them permission... but now that they had disappeared those gray priests, invaded the temple, and tried to dupe me with this fake version, I would never let them touch it again.

My logic was perfectly sound, yet Ferdinand disregarded it with a sigh. “If their goal was simply to read the bible, they would not have had any need to infiltrate your room and replace yours. They could have read one of the transcriptions found in the temple book room or even had a blue priest transcribe it directly.”

“Ah... But what if they wanted to read the Darkness prayer not found in the book room’s copies? Or maybe they wanted to know something about the Haldenzel Miracle. There are so many possibilities!”

Not wanting to admit defeat, I racked my brain for reasons why my bible was superior to the other copies. You could read far more of it than bibles from other duchies where the High Bishop was selected

from the blue priests; surely many would want it.

My bible is really special, buster!

“I accept that those are both potential motives—the Sovereign temple wanted to see the Darkness prayer, and many nobles wish to know more about the occurrence in Haldenzel—but neither explains why they would replace it. They would not even be able to read it without your permission, considering that it has been registered with your mana.”

“Could they not just reregister it with someone else?” I asked, recalling that I had reregistered the key after becoming the High Bishop. It didn’t seem like a very difficult process.

“That would impact which sections can be read, no?”

“Is that why they replaced it, then? Because they want to read the parts their own mana wouldn’t show?” I already knew from our comparison with the Sovereign temple’s version of the bible that the amount one could read was largely dependent on one’s mana, as well as the mana of the High Bishop. I couldn’t imagine that was something many people knew about, however.

Hm... In what way does not having the bible cause problems?

I would carry it with me to the chapel for ceremonies, but that was just for show in my case, since I had committed all the prayers I needed to memory. I never used it for anything else, so it usually functioned as little more than decoration for the High Bishop’s chambers. I couldn’t think of a single way in which I would suffer without it.

Having hit the proverbial wall, I decided to approach the situation from another angle: what things couldn’t I do without the bible? It was only then that I started to realize just how much my version had changed over time.

Could it be that whoever stole my bible is after the hidden message and magic circle inside?

The bible was more or less an instruction manual for becoming king. I was sure that Ferdinand and I were the only ones who had seen that otherwise hidden content, though—not even Hildebrand, a prince, had reacted, so I doubted that anyone else had noticed anything.

“Perhaps their objective was Ehrenfest’s bible itself...” I said, trying to indirectly reference the magic circle as I gazed up at Ferdinand. He had already been resting a contemplative hand on his chin, but upon hearing my remark, he discreetly extended a finger and pressed it against his lips—a clear indicator for me to “shut up.” It seemed that he had understood my message loud and clear, but instead of verbally acknowledging it, he began to state his own theory.

“It is possible that one of their objectives is to put a black mark on

your record. Each duchy has only one bible, not including the transcriptions, and they could use this incident to call your organizational skills into question. They could even criticize me as your guardian and the High Priest.”

“B-But there’s a replacement right there,” I said, pointing at the bible on the shrine. Ferdinand glared at it intently, then shook his head.

“There is no guaranteeing that is a true bible; it could easily be a decoy magic tool that looks similar but is empty on the inside. However, let us assume for a moment that it is indeed a true bible. If we could prove this, then we would subsequently be accused of stealing it from another duchy. Not only will we have lost our own bible, but we will also have been falsely accused of stealing one ourselves. Perhaps that, too, is one of their objectives.”

The blood drained from my face; it was possible that we had already been set up as thieves without even realizing it. “In that case, we need to find out whether it’s real at once!” I exclaimed, reaching toward the shrine.

“Do NOT touch it!” Ferdinand snapped as he smacked my hand away. A jolt of pain shot through my fingers, and as I gazed down, I realized that he hadn’t held back in the slightest.

“O-Ow...”

“There are *three* potential motives that I can deduce,” Ferdinand said, giving the bible on the shrine a hard stare. “Two are to stain your reputation, and the third... is assassination.”

“A-Assassination?” I repeated, wide-eyed. The word alone was almost too much for me to say.

“They would much rather kidnap and imprison you such that they can use your mana as they like, I presume, but that is much harder to accomplish than an assassination.”

“Killing someone is easier...?”

“They were capable of producing such a clever fake and planting it here almost without detection. I would consider assassination without a second thought.”

Ferdinand turned to Eckhart, who whipped out his schtappe and chanted “*messer*” to create a knife. He then reached for one of the pouches on his hip, took out a white fruit, and cut into its flesh. An instant later, he swung the fruit through the air, flinging a spatter of juice toward the bible.

“Aah!” I shrieked. “Eckhart, what are you doing?! You’re going to... stain it...?”

The moment the juice splashed onto the bible, it turned red as if soaked with blood. Eckhart gave the book a hateful glare before handing the remains of the white fruit to Justus.

“As expected...” Ferdinand muttered. “This red filth is a rare poison often gathered at the border between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach. It seeps through the skin when touched, and if smeared upon something that is often touched without a second thought, then one might not even notice the poison until their fate is already sealed. Had we not noticed that our bible was switched, then come the autumn coming-of-age ceremony, the poison would have claimed three victims: you, as you took the bible to the chapel; Fran, as he helped to prepare it; and Hartmut, as he assisted you.”

Ferdinand waved a hand, at which point Justus took one of the potions hanging from his belt. “I didn’t think I would have to use this ever again,” he said with a sigh, then began pouring the potion onto a cloth.

Eckhart put on a leather glove without hesitation, not even needing to be instructed, then took the cloth from Justus and started wiping down the bible. I could clearly see that the potion was cleaning away the red smears of poison.

“It is a retainer’s job to become familiar with poisons, such that they can protect their lord or lady from harm,” Eckhart said, addressing my retainers. “Have you all studied to that end and trained your senses accordingly? Do you have any of the antidotes required to remove the poison intended for Lady Rozemyne?”

Cornelius and my other retainers could only respond with a sharp inhale.

“Rozemyne is the mana-rich Saint of Ehrenfest, slated to become the next archduke’s first wife—that she would become the target of those who wish to weaken our duchy is only obvious,” Eckhart concluded, still wiping down the bible. “Some guard knights you are...”

I saw Cornelius clench his fists. It was being thrust in our faces just how accustomed Ferdinand was to being in life-threatening danger, as well as how cautious and well prepared his retainers needed to be as a result.

“Cornelius, you lack Angelica’s reaction speed and readiness to act, so you’ll need to make up for that with sharp eyes and a mastery of the tools necessary to eliminate danger ahead of time,” Eckhart continued. “Lord Ferdinand was and continues to be the one keeping Lady Rozemyne safe right now, but he’s leaving. Do you really still not understand what that means?”

Angelica never hesitated in my service, since she rarely devoted much thought to anything she did. She would point her weapon at anyone to protect her lady. I needed my other guard knights to fill their own roles, but Eckhart maintained that they weren’t doing this properly.

“I’m not saying that you each need to cover as many bases as Lord Ferdinand does now—that much is impossible for any one of you to do alone. But you have power in numbers. You all need to work together to at least try to fill the hole he’s leaving.”

Eckhart carried out various final checks on the bible, including setting a feystone on it and spraying it with another potion. He then held it out to Ferdinand, who layered magic circles atop it before shaking his head.

“This is a bible in appearance alone,” he said. “Had you brought it to a ceremony, Rozemyne, then you would not have been able to open it. You would have embarrassed yourself in front of all those watching.”

“So, in other words, that’s not a book?”

“It is a magic tool that mimics appearances. There is nothing on the inside.”

“My bible...”

Not only had they stolen my bible, but they hadn’t even replaced it with a proper book! My anger boiled over, and the lid that was keeping my mana in check burst open. My body was radiating heat like a furnace as mana surged through me... but my head felt strangely cool.

“Lady Rozemyne! Your eyes!” Judithe exclaimed, her tone betraying her shock and fear.

All of a sudden, a large hand covered my eyes, blocking my vision. “Do not get emotional, else disaster will strike,” Ferdinand said. “This string of maliciously layered tricks brings the Ivory Tower incident to mind. You are currently in the same position that Wilfried was in back then. One careless move and you will involve everyone. Do you really want to bring about an execution?”

He was right—anything I did in this state would only hurt me, not my enemies, and shame those on my side. I took a deep breath, desperately trying to contain my raging mana.

“We certainly do need to retrieve our bible,” Ferdinand continued. “You are right about that. We simply need to pick the method that will cause the least collateral damage should we fail. Now... have you calmed down somewhat?”

“Yes.”

Ferdinand took his hand away from my eyes, revealing the surprised faces of my retainers. He examined them for a moment, sighed, and then said, “Now is not the time to be in a daze. It is rare for Rozemyne to become this emotional, but she immediately loses control when her books or family are in danger. Learning to deal with this is another of your jobs as her retainers.”

“I now understand the seriousness of your leaving...” Cornelius

muttered, evoking nods of agreement from Judithe and Leonore.

Ferdinand was thinking of strategies to recover our missing bible when Philine burst into the room, having returned from questioning those in the orphanage. “Lady Rozemyne! Something’s wrong with Konrad!” she cried. “He’s hiding in his bed and just keeps calling for your help!”

“He likely knows something... Let us go to him at once,” Ferdinand said, looking over his own retainers. Justus and Eckhart merely nodded in response.

Monika opened the doors for us once we reached the orphanage, and we walked through into the dining room. Delia and Dirk both looked relieved when they saw me, and they knelt down at once.

“Delia, how is Konrad doing?”

“He was feeling unwell, so I sent him to take a nap. Something must have happened in that time because, when Lady Philine went to speak with him, he was trembling and refused to leave his bed.”

I made my way to the stairs at the back of the dining hall while Delia ran me through the day’s events, then I turned to my retainers. “The girls’ building is beyond this point. As men cannot go any farther, I shall continue with Philine and Monika, with Judithe and Leonore as guards.”

I started descending the stairs, leaving Ferdinand and the others behind, then entered the pre-baptism children’s rooms on the first floor. Wilma and a number of small kids were anxiously calling out to Konrad.

“My apologies, but can I ask all of you to leave? I wish for only Philine and my guard knights to be present,” I said, noting that the room wasn’t particularly large. Once everyone else was gone, I tenderly spoke to Konrad, who was still cowering under his covers. “Konrad, it’s me. Can you tell me what happened and who needs help?”

He poked his head out, his face ghastly white and rigid with fear. “P-Please help the gray priests...” he said.

“Are they still alive?”

Konrad frantically nodded, unable to keep his teeth from chattering. I had somewhat given up on the gray priests when Ferdinand said they had disappeared, but it seemed that there was still a chance to save them. Hope surged within my heart once more.

“I can save them,” I said. “Can you tell me all that you know?”

“A scary woman sp-spun her... her schtappe... and wr-wrapped up all the... the gray priests,” Konrad said, stumbling over his words. His eyes darted all around the room, brimming with tears. “She was scary! L-Like Lady Jonsara! She... She hurt them!”

“Oh, Konrad!”

Philine ran over and pulled her brother into an embrace. He clung to her, relieved, and continued to describe what he had seen, sobbing all the while.

Konrad explained that he had come to this room after lunch, having been told to rest by Wilma and Delia. One of the windows offered a full view of the entrance for carriages, and as such arrivals were a rare occurrence, he had watched from the moment the gate first opened.

"The gate opened and a carriage came in," he said, having regained some composure, "but then it suddenly stopped..."

The unusual turn of events had only made Konrad more curious, and a moment later, a woman had stepped out of the carriage, whipped out her schtappe, and restrained the gray priests. Three men had then carried the priests into the carriage before shutting the gate, getting back into the carriage themselves, and departing. The noblewoman alone had stayed behind, bringing out her highbeast and flying to the front entrance.

"They might be okay still. Please save them like you saved me from Lady Jonsara..." Konrad said. It seemed that the sight of the gray priests being bound and kidnapped had brought back some very traumatic memories for him, since he was used to being abused with a schtappe himself. I reached out and stroked his head, paying no mind to the sheen of cold sweat across his brow.

"I will save them," I said. "I have already instructed that information on the carriage be gathered by the soldiers at the city gates, and we will soon know which direction the intruders came from. You may rest easy."

I tried to calm Konrad with the kindest smile I could muster, but I was struggling to keep my outrage from showing on my face. These thieves had stolen my bible, replaced it with a poisoned fake, kidnapped gray priests, and now put Konrad in such a vulnerable state. At the very least, the fact that the gray priests had not actually been disappeared was very valuable intelligence.

"Philine, will you remain here?" I asked, prompting her to look between me and her little brother, who was still clinging to her.

Konrad gave Philine a tight squeeze, then gently pushed her away. "Sister, please go with Lady Rozemyne. Save everyone. I'll wait with Dirk for you to get back."

"As you wish..." she replied.

And so, we returned to the dining hall, leaving Konrad with Dirk and Delia. Philine gave a small smile and said, "I am glad to see that Konrad is becoming more mature, but as his big sister, it makes me feel a bit lonely too."

I made my way over to Justus, who was in conversation with

Fritz. "Apologies for the wait," I said. "Ferdinand, the gray priests are still alive."

"Come again?"

"Konrad saw them being bound with light from a schtappe and put into a carriage. As soon as we have the intelligence we need, we shall rescue them."

"I am surprised they would kidnap them..." Ferdinand replied, stroking his chin. "Making them disappear without a trace is much easier."

Justus shrugged. "The former Veronica faction has been ostracized from the printing and paper-making industries, so perhaps they hope to learn something from the gray priests. And if said gray priests do in fact have information to give, then they are likely very much alive."

"I see," Ferdinand said. "That may be so, but they could also end up like the Devouring soldiers. Our rescue plan must be swift and clandestine. Let us return to the High Bishop's chambers."

We left the orphanage behind us, while Justus and Philine told us everything they had discovered. As it turned out, there were several other important testimonies for us to consider. Philine spoke first, occasionally looking down at her notes.

"A gray shrine maiden who was cleaning the temple mentioned that she had spoken with one of the guards sent to the Noble's Quarter. He had said that she needed to hurry and finish, since a blue priest had a noble visitor."

The guard had apparently said that the noble was "especially harsh on gray shrine maidens and priests," which made it sound entirely like he knew them.

"According to Fritz, that gate guard was once Shikza's attendant," Justus continued. "The fact that he seemed so familiar with the noble suggests that they were most likely someone from Shikza's family. And given that Konrad witnessed a 'scary noblewoman,' it may be safe to assume it was Viscountess Dahldolf, who loathes Lady Rozemyne as the reason for her son's execution."

Viscountess Dahldolf...

She was the mother of Shikza, the knight who had gotten executed for his actions during a trombe hunt back when I was a blue shrine maiden. The head of the Dahldolfs had sworn not to get involved with me to avoid his entire house being executed as well, but it seemed that they had since changed their mind. Or maybe they had some way to escape being punished for this.

As I pondered the matter, Damuel and Angelica came running over. "Lady Rozemyne, we spoke to the gate commanders," Damuel said. "We have asked them to keep a close eye out for any carriages leaving in the near future."

Information from the gates, which managed the coming and going of carriages, was of the utmost importance. All eyes fell on the two knights.

“I ask for your report,” I said.

“Yes, my lady!”

“This time of year is when nobles from the north start arriving for winter socializing. Today alone, ten carriages have entered Ehrenfest. None have left.”

To my knowledge, snow had already begun falling in the north. It wasn’t until sometime later that this weather reached the south, so nobles of some provinces inevitably arrived at the Noble’s Quarter sooner than those of others.

“Four carriages used the north gate, complaining about not being able to use the Noble’s Gate as they normally would due to the absence of any guards there,” Damuel said. “Gunther said that this began occurring at around noon.”

Dad clearly hadn’t hesitated to start gathering intelligence.

“Given that no carriages have exited the city, were the gray priests perhaps taken to the Noble’s Quarter?” I asked.

“If so, they would have registered their mana to open the Noble’s Gate,” Ferdinand replied. “We can learn who used it by consulting the castle.” It was a reasonable idea, but such work was being done by nobles, so we would need to wait several days for a response. We simply couldn’t spare that much time.

“Lady Rozemyne, I—well, actually, *Stenluke* has a report for you too,” Angelica said, stroking her manablade.

“The west gate had news of a suspicious carriage entering the city,” Stenluke began, speaking in Ferdinand’s voice. “The carriage was the kind that a commoner with a bit of money would use, but the driver had the speech and mannerisms of someone who served the nobility. It entered before third bell, then left through the south gate.”

“The south gate?” I repeated.

“A soldier said that he tried to check inside the carriage after hearing a strange bumping noise, but he was silenced and forced to back away after being shown a ring with a noble’s crest. Not much time has passed since then,” Stenluke concluded.

It was just too suspicious. I gazed up at Ferdinand and said, “They couldn’t have gotten far. We should at least go check it out.”

“I shall accompany you. I cannot risk you going alone,” he replied, then looked around the room. “I must admit, it surprises me to see just how much valuable information can be acquired from the lower city—but the testimony of commoners holds little weight against the nobility. We must acquire either the ring or the stolen gray priests without fail. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir!

Rescue

“Philine, Roderick, stay here in the High Bishop’s chambers and transcribe,” I said. “Gil is due to return soon, and the new information he will surely bring must be organized into a single document. Fran will wait with you, but Zahm, Monika, I need you to gather intelligence from the attendants of the blue priests. You may be able to learn something they refused to tell Hartmut.”

I decided against bringing Philine and Roderick, who wouldn’t be of much use in a fight, and instead instructed them to gather information with my temple attendants. They nodded, then left with Zahm and Monika to do just that.

After seeing them off, I turned to my guard knights, who were standing in a row before me. I wanted to leave one of them here. Angelica was our raid leader, Damuel could sense the mana of Devouring soldiers, and Cornelius had the most mana out of my guard knights, so the three of them were coming with us without a doubt. I just needed to choose between Judithe and Leonore.

“Judithe, I want you to ride with me in my highbeast. Be prepared to both guard me and shoot down any targets,” I said. “Leonore, stay here and receive all of the reports from the lower city and temple in my place, on top of guarding these chambers. The moment the situation changes, send an ordonnanz with the new intelligence.”

“Understood.”

“Damuel, Angelica, Cornelius—carry out any orders you may receive from Ferdinand.”

“Yes, my lady!”

As I finished instructing my guard knights, Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus returned, having finished their preparations. Leonore’s expression clouded upon seeing us all together.

“Do you not have too few knights?” she asked. “Perhaps we should contact Aub Ehrenfest and ask him to mobilize the Knight’s Order.”

“And what justification can we give for that?” Ferdinand asked in turn.

“To take back Ehrenfest’s bi...”

Ferdinand shook his head, causing Leonore to fall silent. “We are going only to rescue the gray priests, having by chance heard from the lower city that they were taken away. Furthermore, while we have

reason to believe that a suspicious carriage carrying the gray priests exited through the south gate, we cannot confirm this until we go there ourselves. Our focus today is to save gray priests, which is not a valid reason to summon the Knight's Order."

Leonore's indigo eyes were downcast, but then she suddenly looked up at Ferdinand. "Could we not request that they protect you and Lady Rozemyne? The Knight's Order exists to serve the archducal family."

"We could ask for additional guards from the Knight's Order—that much is true—but if we inform the aub via ordonnanz that there is an emergency, our knowing may be leaked to the former Veronica faction retainers still serving him. Sending a messenger is the safer choice, but we simply do not have the time. The matter requires no further consideration, however, as I do not intend to publicize the bible's disappearance either way. Doing so would only serve to tarnish our reputations."

If we wanted to avoid the world finding out about our bible's disappearance, then we needed to resolve the matter using only the people here with us.

Ferdinand continued, "The bible will ideally be with the gray priests in the carriage, but I expect that things will not be so convenient. We are dealing with someone who is attacking us from various angles to secure as much benefit for themselves as possible; they will doubtless have arranged for the bible to be transported through other means. Furthermore, I would not expect a noblewoman who looks down on gray priests to ride in the same carriage as them. She is presumably traveling by highbeast. We must also keep in mind that, at this moment in time, our assumption that Viscountess Dahldolf may be involved is mere speculation. We have no proof to substantiate our claims."

Everyone nodded. Our first objective was to find and rescue the gray priests. If possible, we also wanted to secure evidence leading us to the noble involved.

Cornelius suddenly shot his head up in apparent realization. "Lord Ferdinand, do you have a plan to prevent Devouring soldiers from exploding?" he asked. During both the Spring Prayer attack and the attempt to kidnap Charlotte, the attackers and their rings had exploded, leaving absolutely no evidence behind. If we allowed the same thing to happen again, then not only would we lose any potential clues, but there was also a risk of the gray priests getting caught in the blast.

We certainly do need a plan to stop the exploding..

All eyes gathered on Ferdinand as we awaited an answer. He glanced at me and my lined-up guard knights, then let out a slow sigh.

“The most reliable method would be to kill them ourselves; they cannot explode without mana in their rings,” he said dryly. “This will allow us to obtain their rings, but it will also make it harder for us to search their memories. If we wish for both, then we will need to sever their arms, heal them, and then tie them up or toss them into a time-stopping magic tool so that they do not die.”

I gasped despite myself. The very idea was horrific, and the thought that it might happen before my very eyes made me sick to my stomach. Ferdinand must have noticed this, as his brow furrowed at once.

“You may stay behind, Rozemyne,” he said. “Screaming in fright or otherwise panicking will only distract your guard knights, and that is beyond unacceptable.”

I understood that he was trying to spare me from what was bound to be a bloody battle, but I had promised Konrad that I would personally save the day. Not to mention, as the orphanage director and the High Bishop, I couldn’t just run away when gray priests were in danger.

“No,” I replied. “I will go.”

We flew south by highbeast. Carriages were drastically slower by comparison, so we were bound to catch up before long if they had left a bell or less ago. We passed over the outer walls, crossed the freshly harvested fields, and traced along the road visible through the leafless branches of autumnal trees.

“If only we at least knew where they were going...” Judithe said from the back seat of my Pandabus.

I considered the situation for a moment. “They said that the carriage left some time after fourth bell, correct? In that case, they won’t have enough time to make it outside the Central District by nightfall. They will need lodgings without fail.”

Lodgings were seldom necessary for me, since I could transport all the gray priests to our destination in my Pandabus, but most people didn’t have drivable highbeasts, and a normal noble wouldn’t allow gray priests to ride with them in the first place. It was only natural that they would need somewhere to stay.

“Lady Rozemyne, do you have any idea where they might be heading?”

“Given that they are carrying bound gray priests, they likely won’t approach cities with winter mansions; the farmers have all moved there now that the Harvest Festival is over. This also means that the farming towns are largely empty. I would expect them to use the houses there.”

Winter being so close meant brutally cold nights; our targets

couldn't risk traveling slowly, as one would during the summer. They would no doubt travel as far as possible, then stay in a vacant house without permission. A carriage would surely stick out in an empty farming town.

"I can't imagine they would turn in just yet, so if the people we're looking for haven't changed direction or boarded a boat, we should see them soon," I said. "There is a crossroads up ahead, however. Both paths lead south, but I would rather we catch up before—"

"A CARRIAGE!"

Judithe had interrupted me with a loud shriek. I enhanced my eyes and squinted, and indeed, there was a carriage below us. It was approaching the crossroads we had just been talking about, but it appeared to be stuck behind a luggage cart traveling in the same direction. The farmer pulling the cart glanced over his shoulder, then took the left road. The carriage took the right and accelerated at once, pleased that its path was clear, while the cart slowed down, relieved that the carriage was gone.

Hm... Something about that felt strange to me.

I cocked my head and gazed down at the cart—in particular at the wide cloth covering its luggage—when Ferdinand suddenly let out a sharp call.

"Damuel!"

Damuel focused on the cart and carriage intently. He was the very best when it came to detecting trace amounts of mana, even now that he had more mana than before. He had purposefully honed his ability so that he could detect others, according to Bonifatius.

"I feel many weak sources of mana in the carriage," Damuel said. "Those are likely the Devouring soldiers. From the cart, I feel only the faintest traces of mana—not even enough for a single Devouring soldier. It must be carrying commoners."

"Understood. Everyone, move as we planned."

"Yes, sir!"

We're in a battle to save them now. I need to focus.

I pricked up my ears, listening as everyone went over the plan, then looked across all the knights. "Prioritize saving the gray priests above all else," I said. "We can obtain evidence later, but we cannot restore lives."

Everyone nodded in response.

My main job was to offer a prayer, so I produced my schtappe and said, "O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft's exalted twelve, I pray that you grant those gathered your divine protection."

Blue light shot from my schtappe. I confirmed that everyone had received the blessing, then moved away from them in Lessy. I needed to get into a position that Judithe could effectively attack from.

“Will this do, Judithe?”

“Could you take us a bit lower? Mm... There. Please stop here.”

I stopped as advised, then looked at the back seat of my Pandabus. Judithe had already taken aim at the carriage driver. We would need to start by separating him and the horses from the carriage, thereby bringing it to a stop.

Judithe’s face was stiff, save for her trembling lips. She was being entrusted with making the first move, so it was only natural that she was nervous.

“Even if you miss, we have backup plans,” I tried to reassure her. “Focus on the task at hand, and try not to worry. You have allies you can count on.”

“Lady Rozemyne, if I miss this shot, my life will lose all meaning, and Hartmut will scold me for wasting the magic tools he gave me,” Judithe replied. Although she sounded more serious than ever, she also seemed to have relaxed a bit. She refocused on her weapon, and her violet eyes gleamed with confidence. “I actually get to do something this time. Don’t worry. I won’t miss.”

I took out my schtappe, feeling tense. After she attacked, I would shoot a rott into the air to signal to the others that the battle had commenced.

“Hyah!” Judithe cried out as she launched a feystone toward the carriage below. Hartmut had made a magic tool for her so that she could attack at long range. I didn’t actually see the feystone strike its target, but I did see the driver sway.

“*Rott.*”

I fired into the sky without a moment’s hesitation. An instant later, a massive ball of mana flew past Lessy and trailed through the air, racing downward. It was Cornelius’s attack, meant to stop the carriage. The great light collided with the ground and then exploded, kicking up a huge cloud of dust. The horses reared in panic, while the driver fell from his perch. Judithe’s aim had evidently been true.

All at once, everyone raced toward the ground on their highbeasts, then one disappeared from sight. Angelica, buffed with full-body magic enhancements, had dispelled her ride so that she could fall even faster.

“Hyaaaaaah!”

Angelica launched an attack while in free fall, tracing a blue arc through the air with her brightly glowing manablade. Her cape was fluttering madly behind her, and she was falling so fast that my mouth went dry with worry. Then, all of a sudden, the carriage lurched and stopped. She had cut through its reins and shafts in the blink of an eye, and the now free horses wasted no time in fleeing.

Angelica had made the slice seem trivial, but it was anything but.

It was beyond me, at the very least. To cut through the shafts in such a deceptively easy motion, one needed to build up so much mana that it was possible to blast even the horses into nothingness.

“That’s our Angelica,” Judithe said, her voice bright now that she had carried out her role. “That carriage won’t be going anywhere, even with the horses rampaging around.”

I started descending toward the immobile carriage in my Pandabus, but the attack was far from over. Eckhart and Cornelius sliced open the side of the vehicle and went to pull out the Devouring soldiers, but their hands stilled when they saw what was inside.

“If you come any closer, they die,” came a voice. There was but a single Devouring soldier in the carriage, and with him were two gray priests bound with rope. One was groaning in pain, a sword protruding from his side, while the other was being held in place by the soldier, with a blade pressed against his neck.

“H-High Bishop! Help!” the gray priest taken hostage cried, inhaling sharply as he tried to look down at the sword threatening his life. The soldier would cut his throat much faster than we could approach.

Eckhart and Cornelius exchanged glances, distracting the Devouring soldier while Ferdinand went around to the other side of the carriage.

Wait a second...

I was continuing toward the ground, suspicious, when Damuel pushed through Eckhart and Cornelius with a simple “Excuse me.” He then started to approach the carriage.

“D-Don’t come any closer!” the Devouring soldier yelled. “Do you not care about this man’s life? Would you so callously sentence him to death in the presence of the merciful Saint of Ehrenfest?!”

The soldier was clearly panicked, and the gray priest yelped as the blade started digging into his neck... but Damuel ignored them both. He readied his blade in complete silence, then mercilessly ran the gray priest through himself. His free hand reached at once for the Devouring soldier’s throat, and a beat later, the man was flung backward out of the carriage.



“What?!”

“Damuel?!”

Seemingly deaf to the cries of all those watching him, Damuel yanked the blade from the second gray priest’s side and then thrust it through his throat to finish him off. “I have been guarding Lady Rozemyne ever since she was a blue shrine maiden, so I know the faces of every single gray priest in the orphanage,” he said, then turned to the Devouring soldier. “Neither of those men were ours. Where are the real gray priests?”

Knew it. I thought I didn’t recognize them.

The two dead “gray priests” were actually Devouring soldiers who had disguised themselves with the actual gray priests’ robes. It must have never even crossed their minds that we knew everyone from the orphanage.

The surviving Devouring soldier paled, now being held down by Eckhart. “If you kill me, you’ll never know where your gray priests are!” he cried, trying to negotiate for his life.

I sighed, watching him from inside Lessy. “We already know where they are; that cart we saw earlier was rather unusual. Farmers start moving to winter mansions after the Harvest Festival, as they need to prepare their harvested crops, make candles, and get ready for the long winter. That left road leads to an empty farming town, and no sane farmer would drive *away* from their nearest winter mansion during this important period unless something quite significant was happening.”

The driver was presumably a Devouring soldier contractually obligated to obey the nobles keeping him alive—and one who knew nothing about how farmers lived, at that. By avoiding cities with winter mansions to stay out of sight, he had made himself stand out so much more.

“Let us go rescue the gray priests,” I said, taking to the skies again.

“Wait, Lady Rozemyne!” Cornelius shouted as my guard knights raced after me.

“Eckhart and I will interrogate this man and clean up this mess. Justus, stay with Rozemyne. Keep her on a tight leash!” Ferdinand ordered. He was referring to me like some kind of wild animal—which was quite rude, if you asked me—but Justus obeyed all the same.

“Yes, my lord!”

We returned to the crossroads and found the cart in no time; it was clattering along the road at a casual pace, much like before. Had it been summertime, I wouldn’t have even batted an eye. The sight was easy to interpret as a farmer making their way back home. The

driver even had the appearance of a simple farmer.

“Lady Rozemyne, should we attack the cart like we did the carriage?” Cornelius asked.

I nodded slowly. “Those other Devouring soldiers didn’t have rings, did they? Perhaps this person does. They used one to pass through the gate, so someone must have it. Let us get our proof.”

Eckhart had immediately moved to sever the Devouring soldier’s hand after he was thrown out of the carriage, only to pause for a moment in confusion. That man hadn’t been wearing the ring, but it was bound to be somewhere.

I waved a hand, signaling for the ambush to begin, and Cornelius launched a mana attack without the slightest hesitation. Just like before, it caused an explosion that kicked up a huge cloud of dust, and just like before, Angelica leapt down to slice through the reins and shafts.

“Guh! Wh-What the...?!” the driver yelled, sounding nothing like a trained soldier. He stared up at Angelica, who had landed on top of the cart and was now pointing Stenluke at him, then started crawling backward, sputtering all the while. “I... I didn’t hear nothin’ about this! All they told me was to carry these guys out! Didn’t think for a moment it was mixed up w’ anythin’ dangerous!”

I couldn’t tell whether this man was an actual farmer or just a Devouring soldier putting on an act.

“Who are you working for?” Angelica asked, thrusting her manablade closer to the man’s throat, refusing to let down her guard.

The man trembled as the tip of the sword came within almost a hair’s breadth of his chin. “Agh! Aaagh! Help me!” he roared.

“Answer my question.”

“I’m working for— Gah!”

Before he could get the words out, thorns of what seemed to be pure light appeared all over his body. They sank into his flesh, then slowly turned into golden flames. A ring hanging from his neck began to shine at the same time.

“Angelica!” I yelled, sensing that an explosion was imminent. She flung her cape around herself, since it was embroidered with countless protective magic circles, and instantly leapt back.

The man started to scream, but the explosion at his chest and the roar of the golden flames drowned out his voice. By the time the fire had subsided, he was nowhere to be seen.

“What was that...?” I asked.

“He must have been bound by especially powerful contract magic,” Damuel replied as he started toward the cart. “He was presumably obligated not to speak of those who hired him or where he was going.”

Everyone nodded in response, not seeming all that surprised or disturbed, but my eyes were wide with shock. “That’s what happens when you violate a magic contract...?” I asked.

“This is my first time seeing it too, but there is no point worrying about those who brought death upon themselves. All that matters right now is whether the gray priests are here,” Damuel said. He gripped his weapon, then cautiously tore away the sheet covering the back of the cart. “Ah...”

Damuel winced and immediately replaced the sheet. It was a strange enough response that everyone tensed up and readied themselves for combat, but upon seeing this, Damuel merely unmorphed his weapon and, with a half-smile, gestured for them to relax.

“It’s fine. The four gray priests are here and nothing else. It’s just... The women might not want to get any closer. The priests had their clothes taken, so...”

Apparently, they were all stark naked save for a single piece of cloth each. That wasn’t good at all. They would surely catch colds in this weather.

“Ferdinand, we rescued the gray priests, but they are without clothes. Please recover the robes the Devouring soldiers were wearing. I will use waschen to remove the blood from them,” I said to an ordonnanz before sending it away. Even some torn robes were better than nothing.

Justus returned to the carriage to fetch the clothes, while Damuel and Cornelius freed the gray priests from their bindings and started asking them questions—after very sensibly covering them with the cart’s sheet, of course. Angelica continued to watch our surroundings, while Judithe and I waited inside Lessy.

Now that things had calmed down, a look of realization dawned on Judithe’s face. “Lady Rozemyne, am I going to be punished...?” she asked. “I’m outside the Noble’s Quarter even though I’m still underage...”

“Whatever do you mean?” I replied. “You never left the Noble’s Quarter.”

“Um... Um?”

“Ferdinand already explained it, didn’t he? We won’t be making this incident public under any circumstance. The gray priests were never kidnapped, and we never left the temple.” This, as well as the fact that our bible had been stolen, would never see the light of day—and there was no way she would be punished when she hadn’t done anything wrong. “More importantly, please send an ordonnanz to the temple. We must inform them that the gray priests are safe.”

“Right!” She prepared an ordonnanz at once. “This is Judithe. Leonore, we have safely rescued the gray priests.”

Having received its message, the ivory bird flew off. Fran would no doubt go to inform those in the orphanage that the gray priests were safe.

“Their clothes are a mess, but I am glad everyone’s okay.”

Justus had struggled to remove the robes from the Devouring soldiers, so two had great slices across the front. He had found the other two robes rolled up inside the carriage, perhaps for later use or to prevent the other two gray priests from running away.

The two priests stuck wearing tattered robes had to hold the fabric in place, but it was better than nothing. They could always get new robes from Wilma once they were back at the temple.

“I never thought you would come with knights, Lady Rozemyne,” one of the gray priests said. “We are truly, eternally grateful.”

“It is only because Konrad witnessed your kidnapping through the orphanage window that I was able to arrive so swiftly. Please show him that you are safe when we return.”

“Yes, my lady.”

The incident with the magic contract violator had given me quite the scare, but the rescue had ended safely nonetheless. We were preparing to make our way back to the temple, with Judithe in the passenger seat of my Pandabus and the gray priests in the back, when an ordonnanz came flying in.

“This is Leonore. My sincerest apologies, but if you have finished rescuing the gray priests, I must ask that you hurry back to the temple as soon as possible. I cannot stop Hartmut alone.”

Uh, what...? Hartmut?!

Evidence

We reunited with Ferdinand and the others, then hurried to the temple. Wilma, Fran, and Leonore welcomed us at the gate.

“Wilma, the gray priests are all safe, but their clothes are in tatters,” I said. “Please sort out some new robes for them, and allow them to spend the rest of today recuperating.”

“Understood. Lady Rozemyne, everyone... I thank you ever so much for saving them,” Wilma replied, giving everyone a smile so joyous that you would think she was the one we had saved. “We had all expected to be abandoned if something happened to us, so your actions today mean more than we can put into words. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

My retainers met this remark with conflicted smiles, and after Wilma returned to the orphanage with the gray priests, Damuel cheerlessly shook his head. “We were only obeying Lady Rozemyne’s orders. If something like this happens again and we aren’t told to intervene, then we unfortunately won’t. Still, it does feel nice to be thanked.”

“Oh my. But I *will* tell you to intervene next time. That much is guaranteed, so there’s nothing to be so disheartened about,” I replied, looking over my retainers. My eyes then came to rest on Leonore, who was waiting for a good opportunity to deliver her report. “So, Leonore, what in the world happened with Hartmut?”

“It might be best for you to see for yourself...” she replied with a tired expression. Then, she started leading us to the rooms for blue priests, which were located away from the High Bishop’s and High Priest’s chambers. She was being courteous enough to match my walking speed, so while the situation was exasperating, it must not have been especially urgent.

“Ah. You’re coming too, Ferdinand?” I asked.

“I am not uninvolved in this matter. Hartmut is using my attendants at the moment, and as none of them came to welcome us, I admit to some concern.”

It was heartening to know that he had decided to join us. “I will entrust dealing with Hartmut to you if whatever we find is beyond my control,” I said.

“He is your retainer. All responsibility falls to you,” Ferdinand dismissively replied just as we arrived at our apparent destination.

There was a gray priest standing in front of the door, and, upon noticing us, he heaved a sigh of relief and allowed us to pass.

“Oh? Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut said, looking up at me with an exceptionally bright smile. “I apologize that you must see this.”

The sight before me was far from normal. There was a tied-up blue priest lying on his front, and sitting on his back was Hartmut, holding what was presumably his *schtappe* in the form of a knife to the priest’s neck. Around them were several gray priests, struggling to tie up the restrained man’s attendants.

What the...

“High Bishop! Help!” the blue priest cried, flailing around in a desperate bid for freedom. “I was speaking to Lord Hartmut when he suddenly enacted this violence upon me!”

Hartmut curtly slammed the pommel of his dagger against the back of the man’s head. “Have you no shame, pleading to Lady Rozemyne, of all people?”

“M... M-M-My sincerest apologies!”

We were all watching in a daze when Leonore suddenly cried, “What are you doing, Hartmut?! You said you were just tying him up to keep any information from leaking! It sounded reasonable enough at the time, as keeping secrecy is indeed important, but...”

Hartmut had decided to visit the now bound priest unannounced, hoping to seize him before he could run away or seek help from any nobles. I understood that it was pretty brazen to hold a meeting without making an appointment, but to Ferdinand’s attendants, it was unthinkable disastrous. They had asked again and again whether what they were doing was truly okay, and Fran had complained that binding a blue priest was very emotionally burdening for gray priests.

“That is when I sent you the *ordonnanz*, Lady Rozemyne, but I never thought he would bind the blue priest and threaten him like this,” Leonore explained, then gave Hartmut a stern look. “Hartmut, what in the world are you doing? Have you happened upon some especially fruitful evidence?”

He looked down at the blue priest with eyes cold enough to chill one’s blood, then faced me and smiled. “There is no notable evidence to speak of. However, he used crude language not suitable for Lady Rozemyne’s ears, so I simply asked whether he understood the implications of his statements and whether he had any proof.”

Given that this was a blue priest of the former Veronica faction, I could guess that this “crude language” was him calling me a commoner. Most would receive this with an eye roll—almost as if to say, “Are you seriously still saying that?”—but with Hartmut in charge, such talk got you a pommel to the back of the head.

“How foolish...” Ferdinand muttered with a dismissive wave. “Hartmut, you were wise to be concerned about information leaking—especially in a situation such as this. That said, your methods are a touch too aggressive. Have the blue priests gather in the High Priest’s chambers, put them under surveillance, and then have them work. We do not have time to waste on this, and your interrogation over these insults can wait. Is that understood?”

“True,” Hartmut replied. He then obediently stood up, noting that the interrogation would instead take place later, when he could take his time with it.

Ferdinand quietly looked down at the blue priest, who was still collapsed on the floor. “You can stay here, restrained, until each blue priest has been questioned, or you can work in the High Priest’s chambers under Hartmut’s supervision. The choice is yours.”

The blue priest gazed up at me, pitifully seeking my help. I didn’t know what he expected. Both were harsh choices, but with Ferdinand and Hartmut this concerned about leaking information, I could only shake my head.

Sorry, but I can’t save you.

The blue priest gave a despairing look, then hung his head and weakly said, “P-Please let me do work...”

“Very well,” Ferdinand replied. “Hartmut, see to it that he completes whatever is assigned to him. I will question the other blue priests.”

Ferdinand’s attendants moved at once, unbinding the blue priest before taking him to the High Priest’s chambers. We then needed to offer the same choice to the other blue priests Hartmut had ordered to be bound. Things sure were busy.

“Have you learned anything else?” Ferdinand asked.

“At most, that people were moving through the halls during lunchtime,” Hartmut said. “I will say, however, that I now see just how little the blue priests understand Lady Rozemyne’s wondrousness and the value of the gray priests in the workshop. I will need to correct this as they gather together for work. The rest I leave to you.”

Ferdinand watched as Hartmut chased after the twitching blue priest, then turned to me. “Those who remain are blue priests likely to insult you. We have thankfully been given the opportunity to send Hartmut away before he sends them all traveling up a certain stairway, but where shall we begin...? There are three blue priests who were particularly close to Shikza’s family. All three come from houses in the former Veronica faction.”

He went on to list three names—one of which made my ears perk up at once. “It’s Egmont,” I said. “He’s definitely the culprit.”

“On what basis?”

“My womanly intuition. He once messed with my book room, if you recall.”

“Ridiculous. You are allowing a personal grudge to cloud your judgment. That argument does not hold water whatsoever,” Ferdinand said, his brow tightly furrowed as he fixed me with a glare. I knew it in my heart, though—Egmont was the only one it could possibly be. There was absolutely no way it was anyone else.

Cornelius shrugged. “Lord Ferdinand, why not question Egmont anyway? All this changes is the order in which we interrogate the blue priests.”

“Hm. You certainly are correct that this discussion is a waste of time.”

I gave Cornelius a grateful smile, since he had convinced Ferdinand to go to Egmont’s chambers. He grinned at me in turn and said, “Not to mention, I trust Lady Rozemyne’s womanly intuition. No matter how tiny she is, she is still a woman.”

“Sorry, Cornelius,” I interjected at once. “Forget everything I just said. Ferdinand is right—this is just me holding a grudge!”

Having him agree with me rather than play the straight man was so embarrassing that it made me want to bury my head in the sand—in fact, it made me want the earth to swallow me up entirely. I cradled my head in agony, while Cornelius fought back a smirk and gently patted my head.

“The High Priest and the High Bishop request an urgent meeting,” Ferdinand announced. “Open the door.”

“No such meeting is scheduled,” came a female voice in response. She was telling us to leave, but Ferdinand instead selected Eckhart and Cornelius from our guard knights, then pointed at the room.

“Breach this door, but not with enough force to endanger those on the other side.”

“Um, are you certain...?” Cornelius asked, looking troubled; but by that point, Eckhart was already standing in front of the door with his schtappe morphed.

“I can do this on my own, Lord Ferdinand,” he said, then swung his sword down. His confidence was clearly well founded, as a moment later, the door slowly fell inward. We all blinked in surprise, while Ferdinand just shook his head.

“I had intended to give Cornelius some experience here, but very well.”

Naturally, the absence of the door meant we could now see what was happening beyond it. A shrine maiden was staring in complete shock, looking uncertain as to what had just happened, and farther into the room, I could see a blue-robed and a gray-robed figure sitting

atop a bench.

“I made it perfectly clear that this is urgent,” Ferdinand said, stepping over the door into the room and ignoring the nearby attendant. Eckhart and Justus casually followed, so I hurriedly did the same with my own guard knights.

On closer inspection, the two figures on the bench were actually Egmont and a shrine maiden, and they had clearly been engaged in something quite indecent. Egmont had cried out when the door first fell through, and he cried out again when he saw me enter behind Ferdinand.

“Th-Th-This is outrageous!” he snapped. “Is the idea of scheduling completely foreign to you?! Lowborns really are such animals!”

All at once, my retainers began to radiate killing intent. “Ah. It really is a good thing we didn’t bring Hartmut,” Cornelius remarked.

“Right,” Angelica added. “Even I nearly drew Stenluke.”

The two of them were cackling softly. Meanwhile, Ferdinand gave both Egmont and the girl now scrambling to cover herself up cold stares.

“You speak with such arrogance, but did you not go to the High Bishop’s chambers unannounced when you took on that gray shrine maiden as an attendant?” Ferdinand said with a dismissive scoff. He was referring to something that had occurred while I was asleep in the jureve, but I was already well aware of Egmont’s crude behavior. The incident with him impregnating Lily and then taking a new shrine maiden in her place immediately came to mind.

Egmont faltered, then puffed out his chest and pointed at me. “Your deception won’t last much longer, brat. We’ll tear off that disguise of yours soon enough.”

Wait, is that...?

My eyes were immediately drawn to the hand that Egmont had raised to point at me—specifically to the feystone-set ring on his middle finger. It was gleaming beneath the light and decorated with a family crest.



He didn't have that ring before, right?

Normally, a ring on the left middle finger was an indicator that someone was a baptized noble—which made this particularly suspicious, as blue priests seldom underwent such baptisms or received the magecrafted rings that came with them. Some chose to wear rings passed down through their family, but Egmont certainly hadn't worn one before, and the only other people I could remember seeing with rings like his were Devouring soldiers with submission contracts.

"Egmont, that ring..." I said, drawing the tiny band to everyone's attention. An instant later, my eyes were covered as Ferdinand threw his cape around me. "Wha?"

I gazed up just in time to see Ferdinand simultaneously morph his shtappe into a sword and swing it downward. My vision was still obscured, but a collective gasp rang in my ears, followed almost immediately by a piercing scream and the spatter of what I could only assume was blood. The abrupt chaos was punctuated with a dull *thud*, which came from somewhere in front of me.

"Ah... GYAAAAAAH!"

Egmont screamed, then his attendants did as well. I could imagine what was happening, but the most I could see were Ferdinand's cape and armor.

Ferdinand quietly began giving instructions while keeping his shtappe pointed at Egmont. "Eckhart, Justus, fetch the magic tool from Rozemyne's workshop! Judithe, Leonore, take Rozemyne to the High Bishop's chambers and ensure she does not leave before I call for her. Cornelius, Damuel, Angelica, bind all of this man's attendants."

"Sir!"

Eckhart and Justus moved at once. The former patted Fran on the shoulder and said, "Open the door to her chambers," before briskly walking away, while the latter wasted no time in hefting me into his arms.

"Excuse me, milady, but we're in a hurry. Judithe, Leonore, let us go," Justus instructed, then started carrying me to the High Bishop's chambers. Fran had already opened the door for us by the time we arrived, and Eckhart was waiting in front of the door to my workshop.

"Rozemyne, would you mind opening it for me?" he said. "I need the magic tool."

I opened the door and permitted both him and Justus to enter. They retrieved the time-stopping magic tool and then promptly left.

"Are you feeling okay, Lady Rozemyne?" Leonore asked, looking at me with worry. "Seeing all that up close must have been disturbing."

I shook my head. "I am fine; Ferdinand was covering my eyes the whole time. Are you and Judithe okay?"

"We *are* knights, you know."

We exchanged smiles, at which point tea and sweets were served. "Hopefully these tasty treats cheer you right up!" Nicola exclaimed with her usual radiant expression. It really made me feel as though things were back to normal as I sipped my tea.

"So what happened, Lady Rozemyne?" Roderick asked, his voice tinged with concern.

"There was a blue priest with a suspicious ring," I replied simply. "We are leaving his detainment to the High Priest and the guard knights. I will carry out my own job. Has there been any news from the lower city?"

I certainly wasn't suited to capturing and interrogating criminals. And as I changed the topic of conversation, Philine produced some notepaper and started delivering her report.

"This is from a commoner by the name of Jutte who works for the Othmar Company. The lack of guards at the temple gate resulted in several drivers patronizing her business to buy sweets for those waiting in the carriages. The first of them arrived a bit before fourth bell."

It seemed that this had all started right after we went to the Italian restaurant.

"Furthermore," Philine continued, "it seems a man who appeared to be the servant of a noble arrived at the Italian restaurant requesting to eat. He was refused due to your meal with Lord Ferdinand, but some have mentioned seeing him linger outside nonetheless."

"Perhaps that man was keeping an eye on our movements," I mused aloud. "It really is suspicious that they knew precisely when we were absent."

Roderick was next to deliver his report. "According to the Gilberta Company, a man appearing to be the servant of a noble arrived at their store between third and fourth bell, seeking cloth dyed in the new style. He introduced himself as a merchant, but his speech, mannerisms, and attitude toward the staff made him seem like someone who spent a great deal of time among the nobility. He seems to have asked what cloth you are interested in, Lady Rozemyne."

It was common practice to seek out one's own personal preference when dealing with new dyes. Most nobles who ordered cloth would request to be shown various examples, then select their favorite and ask for the name of the workshop or craftsperson who had provided it. Nobody in the Florencia faction would simply ask for the same cloth I preferred.

"What was his goal, though? Perhaps he was plotting to somehow

tarnish the Gilberta Company's good name..." I said. Tuuli worked there as a leherl, and we had to consider the possibility that she was being targeted as my hairpin craftswoman.

Justus returned while I was listening to the reports. "My sincerest apologies, milady, but Lord Ferdinand has asked for you to fly to the castle."

It wouldn't have been impossible to move the captured priests by carriage, but if one wanted to get Egmont's attendants and the time-stopping magic tool to the castle as discreetly as possible, my Pandabus was the best option. Lessy could go straight into the castle, while carriages needed to be checked at the entrance gate.

I took my guard knights and prepared to leave for the castle. We were going to be transporting the four bound attendants and the time-stopping magic tool, so my knights put them all into my Pandabus for me. Ferdinand watched them work, then turned to me.

"I apologize for making you do this, Rozemyne..." he muttered.

"I don't mind. This is all for the sake of getting my bible back," I replied. It was easier for me to help than leave everything to Ferdinand and the guard knights.

"Your job is to move them to the castle. Return to the temple immediately after. There is much you need to do here; the orphanage must be looked over, and the blue priests working in the High Priest's chambers need to be freed."

And so, I started making my way to the castle, with Ferdinand flying in front. Judithe was sitting in the passenger seat of my Pandabus, while Angelica and Leonore were in the back to make sure the attendants didn't try anything funny.

As we continued on our journey, I noticed that Ferdinand was heading somewhere other than the archducal family's living quarters, which was unusual. Instead, there was another location coming into view—one that looked a lot like the training grounds where the knights gathered in preparation for the Lord of Winter hunt.

"Do you know where Ferdinand is heading?" I asked.

Angelica pointed at the numerous knights waiting below and simply replied, "A place where criminals go."

We landed soon after, and while my guard knights were getting the attendants and the time-stopping magic tool out of my Pandabus, Karstedt came over and patted my head. "Sorry that you had to go through all that, Rozemyne. We'll get the clues and evidence we need out of them now, so you can leave the rest to us and take it easy for a while."

"But I can't do that while—"

I attempted to protest, but Karstedt cut me off with a swift flick to the forehead. "You need to prepare for what's coming next," he said.

“Capturing the blue priest isn’t the end of all this. If anything, it’s only the beginning.”

New Perspectives

Karstedt had persuaded me, so I returned to the temple as soon as my luggage was taken care of. Egmont was involved in this somehow—that much I already knew—but it was possible that the other blue priests were involved as well. I went to the High Priest's chambers and spoke to Hartmut.

“Hartmut, Ferdinand has gone to the castle, so can I ask you to speak to the other two suspects?”

“Your wish is my command, Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut said, then left with Ferdinand's attendants. All at once, the blue priests who had been working under his supervision relaxed their shoulders.

“Do not let your guards down,” I said. “This is going to be a regular occurrence when Hartmut officially becomes the High Priest. Continue to dedicate yourselves to your work.”

Ferdinand and Hartmut were similar in their complete lack of tolerance for useless blue priests, but their means of dealing with them were significantly different. Perhaps their unique perspectives were to be expected; Ferdinand was a priest, having entered the temple to escape Veronica, whereas Hartmut was assisting me while retaining his noble status.

Hartmut was the quintessential archnoble. He didn't view blue priests as fellow nobles, since they hadn't graduated from the Royal Academy. In fact, in terms of status, he could even lump them together with the gray priests, since his house was above everyone in the temple except Ferdinand and me. As he had stated in his acceptance speech, his main concern was whether the blue priests would prove useful to me. They needed to be careful, else they would very likely be seen as less valuable than the gray priests.

Not to mention, we don't even know how many blue priests will remain blue priests after this winter.

Ferdinand had said that the former Veronica faction was going to be purged, and without support from their houses, blue priests couldn't remain blue. Noble relations wouldn't be the only thing changing dramatically—the temple would feel the ramifications as well.

The students can avoid death by offering their names in the Royal Academy, but what about the really little ones? Will the orphanage take them? It might be hard on our budget, but Ehrenfest will struggle in the

long term if we don't raise more nobles. I wonder what Sylvester is thinking in that regard. Maybe we should talk before I leave for the Royal Academy.

I started to work while I mulled over the situation, and, eventually, Hartmut returned. The other two blue priests seemed to have nothing to do with the infiltration, and after speaking with them and their attendants, we decided that there was no longer a need to keep them under lock and key.

"I appreciate your cooperation," I said. "You may now return to your rooms."

After releasing the blue priests and their attendants and thanking Ferdinand's attendants for dealing with Hartmut, I returned to my own chambers. It was already time for my underage retainers to return home.

"Lady Rozemyne, take great care with your surroundings," Leonore cautioned, her tone betraying her concern, before she, Judithe, Roderick, and Philine departed. Cornelius saw them off with me and then sighed.

"A warning to take care with your surroundings is all well and good, but I do not know what to pay attention to, Lady Rozemyne. I did not even notice that you were mere moments away from being poisoned. There is still so much for me to learn. I need to have Eckhart teach me sooner rather than later..." he muttered, a strong light in his dark eyes.

Hartmut placed a hand on his shoulder. "Cornelius, what exactly do you mean when you say that Lady Rozemyne was almost poisoned?" he asked, a dangerous glint in his orange eyes. He had already left by the time the poison was discovered—and now that I thought about it, we hadn't told him about the fake bible yet either.

I explained everything that had taken place while we were operating separately.

"Oh? The fake bible was smeared with poison that would have killed Lady Rozemyne and me if we had touched it? And it was Viscountess Dahldolf who put it there?" Hartmut asked, wearing a chilly smile. I started to panic, his capture of the blue priest all too fresh in my mind.

"We have not yet confirmed that she is the culprit," I said. "At the very least, wait until we receive Wilma's report from the four guards."

"In that case, we can discuss oft-used poisons and their antidotes in the meantime."

Hartmut turned to Damuel, Angelica, and Cornelius, then began a lecture on various kinds of poison. Angelica was resolutely channeling mana into Stenluke all the while.

"Hartmut, where did you learn all of this?" I asked once he was

finished.

“Lord Justus instructed me on matters of poison while he was working at the temple. According to him, this is knowledge best known by all those serving the archducal family. He did not believe it would prove useful in this era when the archducal family is on good terms, but here we are...”

Hartmut got Fran to fetch his key box, then put on leather gloves and took the bible key from inside. He splashed several potions and pressed various feystones against it, much like Eckhart had done, while explaining what he was doing to my guard knights.

“Lady Rozemyne, are you certain this key is a fake?” Hartmut asked. “Unlike the surface-level mimicry of the bible, it is engraved with a rather complex magic circle.”

“It is not registered with my mana, at the very least.”

Was the key in his hand the real thing? I started to wonder, while Hartmut stared intently at its feystone.

“Is it possible that the noble who infiltrated simply reregistered the key with their own mana?” Hartmut asked. “Our current knowledge is not enough for us to say whether this is a complete fake, and if we jump to such a conclusion simply because the bible is an imitation, then the perpetrator will sneer at our panicked searching.”

I examined the key again; I still couldn’t tell whether it was a clever fake or the real thing with someone else’s mana inside it. “Either way, we won’t know until the bible is returned,” I said. “When will Ferdinand be back?”

“He said that he would be investigating Egmont’s memories swiftly and in secret,” Damuel explained, “so I expect he will return tomorrow or the morning after.”

Ferdinand did not return the next day. I summoned the four gray priests, hoping to learn whatever I could from them.

“At first, the driver identified himself as a member of the Plantin Company and asked to be brought to Brother Egmont,” one of the priests began. The guards had immediately found that suspicious; the Plantin Company always used the same driver, and the carriage had not been their usual one. No word of this visit had come from Gil either, and above all else, the driver had acted much like one of the nobility.

“No matter how rich merchants may be, they are still commoners,” another priest continued. “The Plantin, Gilberta, and Othmar Companies are all exceptionally polite when requesting meetings with blue priests—the children of nobility—so we were taken aback when the driver ordered our silence and told us to obey.”

“And when we identified our concerns, Viscountess Dahldolf

appeared at the carriage window. I recognized her at once, as I once served Brother Shikza. She told us to hurry, as she had an appointment, so I went to Brother Egmont at once to confirm that he was expecting her.”

Shikza and his family were known for how terribly they treated gray priests, so the guard had determined that angering her would endanger them all. Egmont had revealed that he did indeed have a meeting scheduled and said that he would welcome her.

“I returned to inform the others and then went to open the gate,” the priest explained. “It was after the carriage passed through and when I was attempting to close the gate again that we were captured. It all happened so fast that I had no idea what was going on.”

“We were immobilized, taken into the carriage, and then bound with normal rope. It was then that we heard mention that the magic binding us would vanish as we passed the gate, which told us we were being brought outside the city.”

“We did all we could to resist. We attempted to alert the soldiers while passing through the gate, kicking and stomping so frantically that we inadvertently hurt each other in the process, but it was all in vain.”

And so, the kidnappers had made it outside the city. A certain farm town had already arranged for a farmer and cart to meet the carriage, and when this rendezvous occurred, the gray priests were unbound and ordered to remove their clothing to make escaping even harder for them. Once that was done, they were bound again and put in the back of the cart.

“From what we could gather, the farmer driving the cart had agreed to provide his services for money. He stamped a contract with his blood and was given a ring. The plan was seemingly for him to wear the ring on his finger, but he lacked the mana to adjust its size, so he put it on some string and wore it around his neck instead.”

The gray priests had then been covered with cloth, so there was no more information they could provide.

“Thank you ever so much for speaking with me. I will not let Viscountess Dahldolf get away with this,” I said, then instructed the gray priests to return to the orphanage.

“So, in short, there is no mistaking that Viscountess Dahldolf was the noblewoman who infiltrated the temple, and Egmont was the blue priest who permitted her entry,” I said.

“They are doubtless correct, but the testimony of gray priests will not hold in noble society. The verdict will depend on how much information Lord Ferdinand can obtain from Egmont’s memories,” Damuel replied.

It was important to investigate who Egmont’s ring was connected

to, but we didn't know how long it would take to prepare evidence that noble society would accept. We knew who the culprit was, but we were unable to act, and that realization made me restless beyond measure. I wanted to get the bible back as soon as possible.

"Lady Rozemyne, please do not rush off and search for the bible on your own," Cornelius said.

"Worry not—I understand that we need a strong basis before I can use my authority as the archduke's adopted daughter," I replied. "I have no intention of acting like a tyrant and trying to resolve this on my own."

For now, I needed to do what I could in the temple. Thankfully, unlike during the incident with Count Bindewald, I could maneuver such that those in the lower city wouldn't fall victim to the cruelty of nobles.

"We explained the circumstances to the Plantin and Gilberta Companies through Gil and warned them about their names being used during this incident. In response, the Gilberta Company gave us the cloth that they had sold to the suspicious noble's servant."

I spread out the cloth we had received from Gil; it wasn't a piece that Mom had dyed, so those of the Gilberta Company had presumably noticed the servant's strange behavior and given him something from another craftsperson. In any case, the cloth that I used myself was made on order, so it wasn't able to be purchased so easily.

"Still, why did they want to buy cloth similar to the kind that I prefer?" I asked, tilting my head just as an ordonnanz flew in.

"This is Ferdinand," the bird said. "I am returning now. Gather your guard knights." It repeated this message twice more, then turned into a yellow feystone.

"Damuel, fetch my guard knights," I said. "Zahm, contact the High Priest's chambers."

"Understood."

"Put simply, I have gathered more than enough evidence," Ferdinand said, having come to my chambers immediately after returning from the castle and getting changed into his priest robes. He then lowered his voice and continued, "The incident began with an inquiry from Egmont's noble family."

My guard knights and I listened with tense, serious expressions. Egmont's family had messaged him to ask whether there were any days when both the High Bishop and High Priest would be absent from the temple. There were plenty of occasions when both Ferdinand and I were absent, since we both visited the castle, but Egmont was in no position to know when these visits occurred.

Several days later, however, an opportunity had presented itself.

The blue priests had all been informed that the High Bishop's chambers were going to be closed for our trip to the Italian restaurant.

"Egmont wasted no time informing his house," Ferdinand continued. "In response, they sent him a request for a meeting with Viscountess Dahldolf."

The meeting had apparently been scheduled for the day of our absence. Egmont had agreed at once; Viscountess Dahldolf exercised so much control over his house that refusal wasn't an option.

"Egmont received a letter informing him that she would use the Plantin Company's name upon her arrival, since she had a secret request. His family had emphasized that he was to do everything in his power to assist her. He burned this letter so that it could not be used as evidence, but of course..."

On the day of, Egmont had waited anxiously, unsure of what the request was going to be. He had then gone to welcome Viscountess Dahldolf upon her arrival.

"The person whom Egmont saw was Viscountess Dahldolf, without a doubt," Ferdinand continued. "Egmont himself was unaware that the gray priests serving as guards had been kidnapped."

Apparently, Egmont had received a simple request from Viscountess Dahldolf: "Use one reason or another to remove the attendants still in the High Bishop's chambers. I would not like for there to be any violence." To accomplish this, he had sent one of his own attendants to artfully distract Nicola, Fritz, and Gil while they were delivering divine gifts to the orphanage.

"So they snuck in while this attendant kept Gil and the others away?" I asked.

"Indeed. Egmont ordered another of his attendants to sneak into the High Bishop's chambers through the attendants' rooms. They unlocked the chambers from within, then brought out the bible's key. That much was simple, as all keys are kept in the same place."

Managing keys was a duty often left to head attendants, and while the front door to my chambers had of course been locked, many of the attendants' rooms had remained open. As a result, it had been easy for someone familiar with the temple to sneak in. Egmont's attendant had searched for the box in Fran's room while Viscountess Dahldolf switched the bibles.

"That commoner child is responsible for the death of my son, and for the aub growing cold to my house," she had said while placing a fist-size magic tool against the bible and watching it morph into a perfect replica. "Surely I can be forgiven for seeking some revenge, no?"

She had then switched the bible for the fake. The likeness was so uncanny that even someone who had witnessed the events in person

would struggle to tell which was which.

“I cannot wait to see that vile girl squirm during the autumn coming-of-age ceremony and winter socializing,” the viscountess had continued with a venomous smile. “By the time she realizes that she has lost the true bible, it will already be too late—and she will be none the wiser as to who took it and how.”

She had then plucked the bible key from the box that Egmont’s attendant had found and reregistered it with her own mana, hoping to make us think it was a fake as well.

“Both she and Lord Ferdinand will be reproached for failing to properly look after the bible, and a punishment of no small significance will doubtless follow,” she had concluded. It seemed that she was envisioning me embarrassing myself during a ceremony and then being removed from my position as the High Bishop—or, as an even grander outcome, being disowned by the archduke.

Egmont had chuckled at the very idea. The arrogant child who had somehow become the High Bishop despite her origins as a commoner blue robe would no doubt fall apart in front of all those gathered when she realized that her bible was a fake. He was dying to see the ceremony where this shocking truth came to light. Apparently, he was hoping that it would ease some of the anger he felt about his pay cut after the death of the previous High Bishop and the fact that the Harvest Festival was now less of a treat than it used to be.

“Do tell me how that commoner ceremony goes,” the viscountess had said. She had then turned away from Egmont, stroked the fake bible with a gloved hand, and then returned the key to its box.

Ferdinand continued with his explanation. “Once the deed was done, and the pair had removed all traces of their entry, they moved to Egmont’s chambers. There, they signed a magic contract.”

The viscountess had then explained what was to come now that they had swapped out the bible. “Once that child is removed from her post, I shall recommend that you be chosen as the next High Bishop,” she had said with a smile. “After all, you have helped me a tremendous deal.”

“Egmont smiled in turn, thinking that only a fool would trust the word of a noble—and as if reading his mind, Lady Dahldolf produced a magic contract to reassure him,” Ferdinand continued. This magic contract truly had included a passage saying that she would recommend Egmont to be the next High Bishop. “To sign a magic contract is to make a vow that cannot be broken. This alluring offer was enough for Egmont to sign his name and stamp the contract with his blood, officializing their agreement. She gave him a feystone ring to signify her trust and told him that he had now become a noble himself.”

Feystone rings were given to noble children during their baptism. As a blue priest, Egmont had never before received one, so he had eagerly slid it onto his left middle finger.

“This ring will allow you to wield the mana within yourself,” the viscountess had said. “All you must do now is wait for that deceitful commoner to be dragged from her post.”

Egmont had gazed at his feystone ring with a broad grin. Both parties spoke at length about how much they loathed the commoner High Bishop, and then, once they were both satisfied, Viscountess Dahldolf started home by highbeast with the bible now in her possession. Separating from the carriage had been a deliberate move to ensure that nobody knew she had visited the temple.

“And, indeed, no traces of their visit remained,” Ferdinand said. “Egmont was assured of victory, thinking that he needed only wait until the autumn coming-of-age ceremony—but that quickly changed when we forced our way in and captured him. Perhaps he had grown arrogant after drinking so much alcohol and hearing Viscountess Dahldolf speak so ill of you.” He sighed, then gave me a cynical smile. “Rozemyne, do you recall the time Count Bindewald signed a submission contract with an orphan?”

I did. The paper that Delia had believed to be an adoption contract had in fact been double-layered, and it had actually been a submission contract.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Indeed. The contract that Viscountess Dahldolf produced was double-layered as well. Egmont had actually signed a submission contract, and the ring he had received was that of a Devouring soldier. They were most likely going to eliminate him once they finished their business,” Ferdinand explained. “It is... fortunate that we were able to capture him so soon. His memories as a blue priest have provided us with irrefutable evidence, which we can use to eliminate not just Viscountess Dahldolf, but her entire house. Furthermore, as Egmont’s ring bore the crest of Gerlach, his involvement is clear as well. I am much looking forward to this winter.”

Ferdinand seemed rather pleased to have gotten his hands on such powerful evidence against the former Veronica faction, and the grin playing on his lips only further confirmed it. Karstedt and Sylvester had both praised us for getting through this trap when Ferdinand reported the situation to them.

“In this instance, it was your ever-persistent attachment to books that surprised me, not your womanly intuition,” Ferdinand concluded. “We discovered this incident due to the sense of unease that you felt. Had you not noticed, things could have gone much worse.”

“If you are done contemplating my love for books, then let us get

going at once," I said, standing up.

Ferdinand shot me a look, his brow furrowed. "And where are you going?"

"Isn't that obvious? To get my bible back."

We knew that Viscountess Dahldolf now had our bible, and we had evidence that would convince noble society. Surely there was nothing left for us to do but retrieve what had been taken from us.

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow, eyeing me like I was stupid. "Your answer did not match my question," he said. "I asked *where* you are going. I said nothing of your objective, which I understood without even needing to ask."

"To the places Viscountess Dahldolf will most likely be. First, her winter estate in the Noble's Quarter. If she is not there, I will attack her summer estate in Dahldolf. I will retrieve my book no matter how far I must chase her. She will not get away," I declared, clenching my fist in determination.

Ferdinand stood up as well. "We certainly do need to retrieve the bible. Very well, then; let us make for Viscount Dahldolf's estate. We shall restrain all those who oppose us. As we do not know whose memories will prove valuable, we will need to search them all."

So began my invasion of Viscount Dahldolf's winter estate with Ferdinand and my guard knights. I was resolved to get my bible back, no matter what.

Viscount Dahldolf's Estate

I had been champing at the bit to detain Viscountess Dahldolf, so now that we had the evidence we needed, I was out of the High Bishop's chambers the instant Ferdinand gave the okay. Hartmut was accompanying my guard knights, having said that it was his duty as the next High Priest to reclaim the bible for my sake.

"You are right that we need to get my book back," I agreed.

"Yes," he said. "Our saint absolutely needs her bible."

At times like this, Hartmut made for a very strong ally. I enhanced my body with more mana than usual and sprinted outside at max speed. I was already gasping for breath by the time I reached the doors, but surrender wasn't an option.

I'm getting my book back no matter what. I won't even hesitate to hold a bloody carnival if that's what it takes!

I jumped into my highbeast and grabbed the wheel, ready to take off, and then... stopped. In my rush to reclaim the bible, I had completely neglected one crucial detail: "Um, Ferdinand... where is Viscount Dahldolf's estate?"

"Wha?!" Judithe exclaimed. "Lady Rozemyne, you ran off without even knowing where you need to go?!"

"That doesn't matter right now," I replied—a response that caused my guard knights to all slump their shoulders. "The important thing is that I've got the will to succeed."

Ferdinand was beside me on his own highbeast, having only needed to walk at a brisk pace to keep up with my running at full tilt. "Follow after me," he said. "I expect that you would only cause problems if you arrived there ahead of me."

Upon our arrival at the Dahldolf estate, it became clear that knights had already been assigned to watch the premises. They came over to Ferdinand when we landed and whispered that, as expected, only Viscountess Dahldolf was inside. Snow had yet to fall proper in her home province, so the rest of her family was still at their summer estate.

"Is she attempting to minimize collateral damage, or is she simply acting alone so that they do not interfere...?" Ferdinand muttered to himself, then gave the knights their next instructions. I watched them out of the corner of my eye from the front entrance, then got Hartmut

to knock on the door.

Listen, I'm only having Hartmut knock because I don't want Ferdinand grumbling about my "unladylike" and "uncouth" behavior. It's not because I'm so short that I can't reach the knocker. I'm serious!

As I was glaring at the cow-shaped knocker far above my head, the door opened to reveal a diligent-looking old man—Viscountess Dahldolf's head attendant, perhaps. He stared at my retainers in surprise, then looked down at me and blinked several times. "If it isn't Lady Rozemyne," he said. "Might I ask what business you have here? The giebe has not yet arrived, and I do not believe you have a meeting scheduled with my lady."

For obvious reasons, we hadn't made an appointment before coming here to capture the viscountess.

"I wish to see Viscountess Dahldolf," I replied with a smile. "Will you take us to her chambers?"

"I cannot allow anyone inside unless they have a meeting. You must know that, Lady Rozemyne," he said with a polite yet firm tone.

In lieu of a response, I took out my schtappe and bound the man with bands of light. Ferdinand had said that we could restrain anyone who opposed us, and I wasn't going to let anyone get between me and my bible.

"Lady Rozemyne?!" the attendant exclaimed. He wobbled in place for a moment, no longer able to move his arms, then collapsed to the floor, his expression a mixture of shock and confusion.

"So, where might Viscountess Dahldolf's chambers be?" I asked, giving him one last opportunity to cooperate.

"I cannot answer."

Even while bound, the man refused to divulge any information. He was a model attendant without a doubt—and for that reason, I stopped wasting my time with him and continued into the building. "It's unfortunate that you will not answer, but all noble estates are built similarly. I assume she is in the residential area of the estate, and finding her should not take long."

"You may be the archduke's adopted daughter, Lady Rozemyne, but do you truly believe that you can get away with the crime of restraining an attendant and entering a noble estate while its lord is absent?" the man asked, a determined glint in his eye despite his current predicament.

I glanced back at him and giggled, feeling the mana coursing through my body. "My, my... Is this not how the Dahldolfs operate themselves? Viscountess Dahldolf restrained my guards and infiltrated the temple while I was absent, when she had not scheduled a meeting with me, and stole something that I hold dear. I believe you have no right to criticize me when I am simply doing the same."

“What?!” the attendant exclaimed, his eyes wide like saucers. Perhaps he was crying out in surprise at my revelation—or perhaps he was crying out because I was now Crushing him. I was only doing it lightly, of course; this man wasn’t my enemy, and he was a valuable source of information.

“Where is Viscountess Dahldolf’s room? Answer.”

“Ngh... Grk!”

I was barely even Crushing him, but all of a sudden, his eyes rolled back into his head and his mouth began to foam. He had fallen unconscious.

Well, whatever.

This didn’t change what I needed to do. I started toward the third floor, where the lady of the estate’s chambers tended to be.

“Rozemyne, should you not be using your highbeast?” Ferdinand suddenly asked, sounding very much annoyed. Before I could answer, however, there came a series of resounding explosions from somewhere above us. It definitely wasn’t what one would expect to hear in a noble estate.

“That came from the lady’s quarters! Hurry!” Eckhart shouted.

“Judithe, Angelica, stay with Rozemyne!” Ferdinand barked, then bolted up the stairs with his guard knights. Their speed was on another level.

I frantically produced Lessy, climbed inside, and raced after them.

“Do it, Eckhart!”

“Understood!”

I caught up just in time to see my guard knights readying their schtappes while Eckhart kicked down the remains of the door he had just sliced through. The next thing I knew, my nostrils were assailed with a stench so foul that it almost made me vomit. Ferdinand and Eckhart were standing in the doorway in wide-eyed shock.

“Rozemyne, stay back!” Ferdinand shouted.

“Right!”

Still in my Pandabus, I jumped away from the entrance to the room. Damuel and Cornelius could see inside as well, and they looked sick to their stomachs.

“What can you see?” I asked.

“Corpses,” Damuel replied simply. “There is blood sprayed all across the room and pooling beneath the bodies of three women. It seems that their heads were blown off, given that their necks now end in disfigured stumps.”

“Guhhhh! Too much information!”

I squeezed my eyes shut and stared down at my feet. For as much as I had gone on about starting a bloody carnival, I hadn’t actually envisioned *that* much blood.

This is too real—and so much more brutal than I expected.

“She must have killed them and herself upon noticing our arrival. Her resolve was too strong...” Ferdinand said with a sigh as he stepped into the room. Justus, Eckhart, and my male retainers followed after, while I tucked myself away in a corner of the hall, away from the terrible sight. My female knights stayed behind to guard me.

Actual bloody carnivals sure are scary...

“Lady Rozemyne, Viscountess Dahldolf appears to have left behind a note,” Hartmut said, bringing over a message that had clearly been scribbled in a hurry. It cursed my house and ended with a defiant “I shall not let you have my memories. Try to find what you’ve lost, if you can.”

If we couldn’t find it, then Ferdinand and I—the two most responsible for Shikza’s death—would be disgraced, and the archduke would face problems for having lost the duchy’s only bible. That alone was enough to satisfy Viscountess Dahldolf, it seemed. She had fallen into despair upon seeing how her house responded to her son’s execution and wanted to take revenge against Ferdinand and me—even if doing so cast her entire house into ruin. Her seething hatred and raw emotion seeped through every word on the page, which was dotted with blood.

“So she dragged her family into this against their will...” I said.

“And the attendants who died with her, I imagine. They must have been involved in this plot for her to go to such lengths to ensure their memories cannot be read.”

The viscountess had killed not only herself, but all those involved in the bible switching. It was clear to see that our search was far from over.

“Well, now we have no idea where our bible might be,” I said. I had assumed that we would find it after capturing Viscountess Dahldolf, but she had very thoroughly obliterated any leads we might have been able to follow. Now, we had no idea where to look.

“Given the abruptness of the suicide,” Hartmut noted, “we can conclude that she did not expect our visit. The bible is possibly still in this estate—or if not, there may be clues as to where she sent it.”

Finding the bible on our own would prove difficult. We couldn’t open Viscountess Dahldolf’s hidden room without Viscount Dahldolf’s assistance, and it was unlikely that we would get much help from her highly diligent servants. Reading the servants’ memories from top to bottom was an option, but doing so would inevitably make this incident public.

What should we do? We’ll need the viscount to actively help us with our search, but I can’t imagine he’ll ever agree to that.

“Rozemyne, tell the knights outside to assist us, then return to the

castle ahead of me with your guard knights,” Ferdinand said. “Secure a meeting with the aub, explain the circumstances, and ask him to summon the giebe. I will preserve this scene and gather information before following after you. We know that three people died here, but I must confirm that one of these corpses truly belongs to Viscountess Dahldolf.”

Standing around wouldn’t get me any closer to finding the bible, so I promptly sent an ordonnanz to Sylvester asking for an urgent meeting, then sent another to Rihyarda saying that I would be returning to the castle. From there, I asked the knights keeping watch outside to assist Ferdinand, then brought my guard knights with me to the castle.

Sylvester had sensed that my ordonnanz meant serious business—likely because Ferdinand had already told him about the bible being stolen, and Karstedt had given him a report about Egmont’s memories. He summoned us as soon as Ferdinand arrived at the castle, and his office had already been cleared of people when we entered.

“What happened?” Sylvester asked, a sharp look in his dark-green eyes.

Ferdinand stepped forward. “Viscountess Dahldolf and a number of her attendants are dead. I can confirm that it was not a murder, and that the viscountess’s attendants perished from her mana. She exploded their heads and then her own, such that none of their memories can be read.”

“This can’t be happening...” Sylvester muttered. He tightly shut his eyes, then sighed. “We’ll need to call the giebe over right away, investigate his house’s involvement, and take care of them. This... is not going to make our winter plans any easier.”

He was referring to the purge of the former Veronica faction. Eliminating the Dahldolfs at this juncture would no doubt elicit a response of some kind from the former Veronica faction’s nobles. Sylvester frowned, unable to predict how that would impact their winter plans.

“Sylvester, are you going to execute all of the Dahldolfs for this...?” I asked.

“They stole our bible and tried to assassinate my adopted daughter,” he replied. “It’s only natural that the whole house is deemed guilty by association.”

“It may be natural, but... isn’t punishing innocent people the reason Yurgenschmidt is currently suffering a noble shortage? Isn’t killing by association the reason so many duchies aren’t able to manage themselves properly?” We had already called the excessive purging dumb for how it crippled the country, so it would be even dumber if we added to the problem ourselves.

“What would you do instead, then?”

“Use Schutzaria’s shield to confirm whether they hold any malice, bind them with name-swearing if not, and allow their house to continue doing its job?”

Just as there were magic tools that only the aub could operate, there were magic tools that only giebess could operate. Our duchy’s average mana level was going up thanks to my compression method, but we still didn’t have that much leeway when it came to manpower.

“The children in the Royal Academy can avoid death by offering their names, no?” I continued. “I feel that any adults who are proven not to be hostile should receive the same choice.”

My suggestion was met with a firm headshake—not from Sylvester, but from Karstedt. “That would mean that all those we executed by association in the past were killed unnecessarily,” he said.

“Father, one member of a house holding malice does not mean that the entire house is malicious. We must make it so that crimes belong to the individual and the individual alone, otherwise this chain of hatred will never end. We can check for ill intentions with Schutzaria’s shield, so let us be the ones to break the cycle.”

My suggestion would have been more problematic if we were taking the Dahldolfs at their word, but Schutzaria’s shield meant that we could actually see how they were feeling on the inside. It seemed smart to use the tools at our disposal and increase our support base.

“Still, that feels like a weak punishment for trying to assassinate an archducal family member...” Sylvester said.

“Oh, have you forgotten already?” I asked. “If we retrieve our bible, then this incident never occurred, and there will be no reason for us to publicly charge them. We can have them give their names in secret and conclude the matter there.”

Sylvester fell into thought, examining me through narrowed eyes that seemed to reach deep into my soul. He was making his archduke face, and my back straightened on instinct.

“Rozemyne, why are you going to such lengths to protect House Dahldolf when its viscountess tried to assassinate you?” he eventually asked. “If you allow them to live, the same thing might happen to you again. Eliminating them is the best choice for your own sake.”

“Offering them a means to survive will motivate them to help search for the bible.”

We knew nothing about Viscountess Dahldolf, so it was far more efficient to have people more familiar with her personality and preferences search in our place. If we gave the remaining Dahldolfs the chance to avoid execution, the viscount would surely mobilize his entire house to assist us—which would make searching the viscountess’s hidden room and questioning the servants all the easier.

“As it stands,” I continued, “executing those who hold no malice is a poor move. We should give them the chance to stay alive—to dedicate themselves to helping us.”

Purging the house entirely would tie up some loose ends, but the cost was far too great. Some would lose their mind and act out of desperation when it became apparent that their entire family was about to be executed, but if we offered them a lifeline, we could expect the giebe to do everything in his power to protect his house and its land—as was his job.

Karstedt was looking at me with exasperation, but Sylvester grinned with amusement. “Hm... Alright then,” he said. “To be honest, I’ve already been pulling my hair out over how many nobles we’re going to lose in the former Veronica faction purge. I’ll screen the Dahldolfs with this Wind shield of yours and offer them a chance to prove themselves.”

As we wanted to keep the whole bible incident from reaching the public, we needed to keep our meeting with Viscount Dahldolf a secret. Sylvester had said that it was necessary for us to go to the viscount’s estate, and the plan was to meet in a particular room so that we could return stealthily when our business was complete.

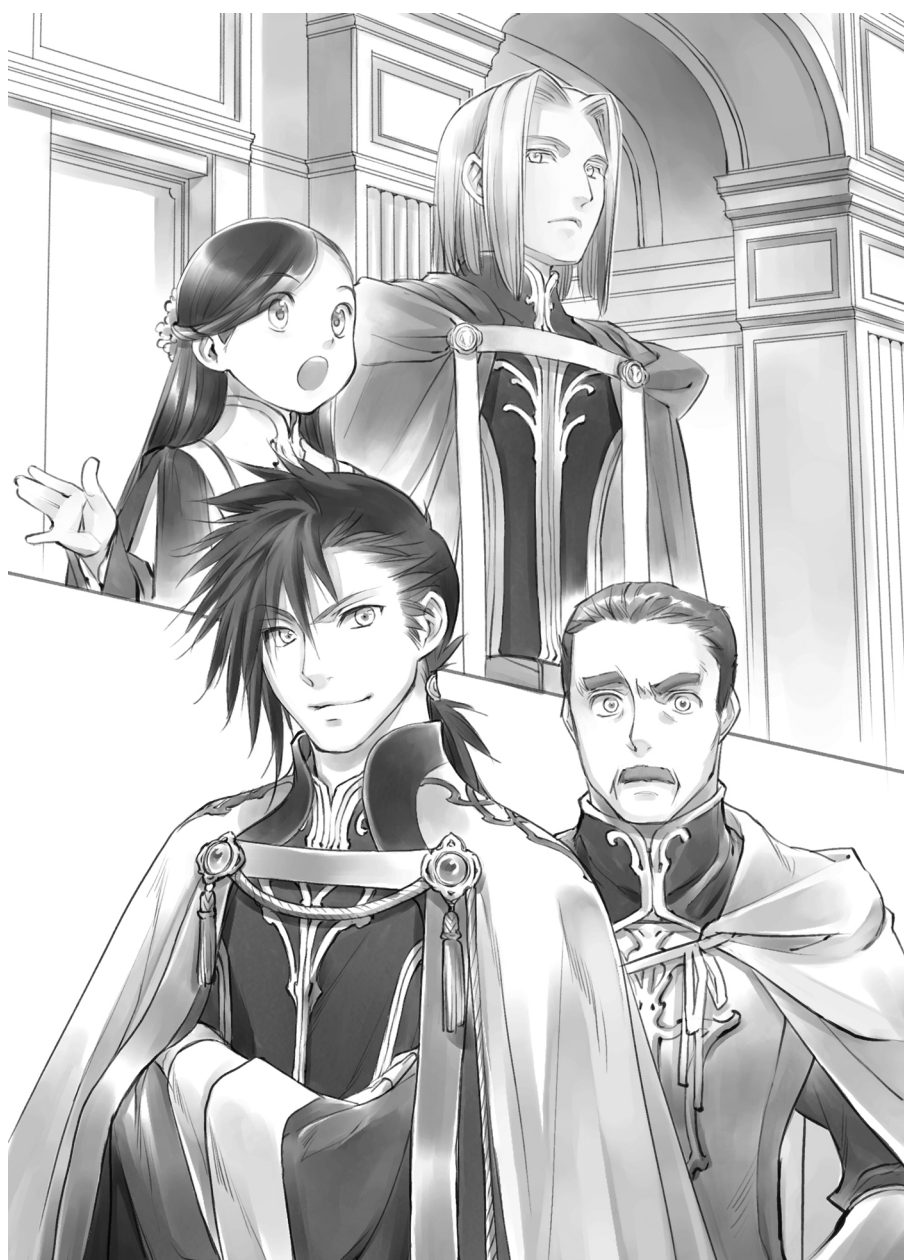
“The aub said that he plans to elude his retainers, but how exactly will that be possible?” Leonore asked, confused.

I didn’t know any more about Sylvester’s escape tricks than she did; I simply waited in place, as instructed, and gazed outside. We were in a guest room with a large balcony that was currently bathed in sunlight.

“Done and done,” Sylvester said, having appeared out of nowhere with Karstedt in tow. “Let’s go.”

“How did you get in here?” I asked, conscious that the door to the room had remained firmly shut the entire time.

“A combination of servant hallways and secret exits that only the archduke can use. Few others would be able to pull off such a flawless escape.”



I shook my head in complete disbelief as he puffed out his chest. Was this really something to boast about?

Sylvester pulled open the door to the balcony and turned around. “Alright, Rozemyne. Make your highbeast. Mine would stand out too much, so Karstedt and I will ride with you.”

It was true that Sylvester’s highbeast would completely undermine our efforts to act in secret; he was the only person who could use a triple-headed lion, so traveling on it would make our movements obvious. I made Lessy a little bigger before allowing Sylvester and Karstedt inside.

“Ooh!” Sylvester exclaimed, his eyes sparkling as he peered all around. I could tell that he wanted nothing more than to bombard me with questions, but because Judithe was still in the passenger seat, he showed some restraint to maintain his archducal gravitas.

Once everyone had their seat belts on, I took to the sky.

Finding the Book

“Aub Ehrenfest, what is the meaning of this?” Giebe Dahldolf asked, having come to his parlor with his son after receiving an urgent summons. He was staring at Sylvester in complete shock—an understandable reaction, considering that the archduke in question was inside a transparent hemispherical shield.

“Your wife stole into the temple,” Sylvester replied. “She took Ehrenfest’s bible and replaced it with a fake, which she smeared with poison in an attempt to assassinate Rozemyne. We have evidence to substantiate all these claims. I told you once before to never again get involved with Rozemyne. If you care about your house, Giebe Dahldolf, then why did you leave your wife to her own devices?”

The giebe knelt at once. He had turned ghostly white, and his lip—no, his entire body—was trembling uncontrollably. His son, who would presumably be the next Giebe Dahldolf, knelt beside him with gritted teeth.

“I warned you, Father. I told you that woman was too emotional—that she didn’t act like a proper noble. I told you to lock her away before she destroyed our house in the name of that useless Shikza. In fact, I’ve opposed you treating her as your first wife ever since Mother passed away.”

“Are you his successor?” Sylvester asked.

There was a hesitant pause before the son replied, “My name is Jeremias. I was my father’s successor, before that woman ruined us.” He grimaced, trying to swallow back the anger he could no longer do anything about, then gave a defeated smile.

“You might still take your place as the next giebe.”

Jeremias straightened up at once, taken aback. Viscount Dahldolf was similarly shocked beyond words.

“The Saint of Ehrenfest is more merciful than you know,” Sylvester continued. “‘Crimes should belong to the individual, not their entire house,’ she said to me, pleading. ‘Is there no way to spare those who committed no wrongs?’”

“It can’t be... Is that true?!” they exclaimed in unison, their eyes flitting between Sylvester and me. It was clear from the looks on their faces that they were trying to determine whether this was a trick of some kind. I needed to clear the air; we wouldn’t get anywhere while they were so suspicious of us.

“Giebe Dahldolf,” I said, stepping forward with my most saintly smile, “I want only for my stolen bible to be returned. The viscountess has already suffered the consequences, and I do not wish to take her innocent family down with her.”

My earnest appeal must have done the trick, as the two suddenly looked more hopeful and relaxed. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the head attendant whom I had bound and Crushed during our previous visit; he seemed equal parts fearful and doubtful.

Look, buddy, I'm trying to help. You'd better not spill the beans about our little encounter.

I shot him a deliberate smile, which made him recoil and start shaking.

“That said,” Sylvester interjected, speaking with a steady cadence, “I cannot just accept Rozemyne's plea—not when we have executed so many for the crime of association in the past. A compromise is necessary. If you wish to live, then you will need to return the bible, prove to us that you have no malevolent intentions, and give your names to me.”

“O-Our names?” the viscount repeated.

“Yes. We cannot settle for half measures. Giebe Dahldolf, future Giebe Dahldolf, if you both have the resolve to give your names, then I will see to it that Viscountess Dahldolf's treason does not affect your house.”

Name-swearing was the one way that someone could prove absolute fealty. It meant giving one's lord or lady the power to end one's life at any time, to display one's complete loyalty as a vassal. The demand we were making was far from normal, and it was especially hard to accept for those who knew what it entailed. The two Dahldolfs nervously swallowed.

“Aub Ehrenfest, I... I wish to express my loyalty and gratitude for being offered this opportunity to save my house,” Jeremias said upon steeling his resolve.

Viscount Dahldolf remained silent for a time, then he clenched his fists, squeezed his eyes shut, and bowed his head. “I am honored by your kindness, Aub Ehrenfest, but that is not something I can do.”

“Father?!” Jeremias shouted, unable to believe his ears. I likewise hadn't expected the giebe to refuse this opportunity to save his family.

Viscount Dahldolf was well aware that all eyes were on him, and with a pained groan he said, “I no longer have a name to give.” He had given it to someone else. Ferdinand and his retainers had said that name-swearing was exceptionally rare, but now I wasn't so sure.

Sylvester shook his head. “If you have no name to give, then Dahldolf will—”

“However! For the sake of my house, I will show you nothing but

loyalty and sincerity. Please, allow me to find the bible and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that we hold no malice whatsoever,” Viscount Dahldolf pleaded, desperate to escape being punished by association.

“Who did you give your name to?” Sylvester asked, his eyes narrowed. “Your answer will determine whether I can trust you.”

“Lady Veronica, my lord.”

According to the viscount, Veronica’s mother Gabriele had struggled to adjust to Ehrenfest after marrying into the duchy from Ahrensbach. To support and protect her children, she needed vassals who would not betray her, and so she had demanded that her servants and their children give their names to her.

“I am told that name-swearing is far more common in Ahrensbach than Ehrenfest,” Viscount Dahldolf continued. “My mother came to Ehrenfest with Lady Gabriele and raised me to believe that a servant who does not offer their name is not to be trusted.”

Back when the viscount had come of age—before Sylvester had even been born—he had needed to choose between giving his name to Georgine or Veronica. He had gone with the latter, who was already the archduke’s first wife at the time.

“Do you mean to say there are others of Ahrensbach blood who have given their names as you have?” Sylvester asked. “To my mother and sister?”

“Yes, my lord. We had to come together and form a solid defense to resist the Leisegangs and protect Lady Veronica.”

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. I now realized why the mednobles at the core of the former Veronica faction weren’t switching sides, as mednobles were prone to doing. It seemed that there were some pretty big cultural differences between our two duchies when it came to name-swearing.

“You did not have your son give his name, correct?” Sylvester asked, looking at Jeremias.

“I did not feel there was a need. When he came of age, Lady Veronica already wielded enough power to restrain the Leisegangs, and her faction had grown large enough that unity was less crucial. Aub Ehrenfest... I will do all that I can. Please, spare my house.”

Sylvester gazed down at Viscount Dahldolf, then waved a hand. “Bring back the stolen bible; only then will your fate be decided. I intend to keep a very close eye on your efforts.”

“We are honored.”

And with that, the search for the bible began. Viscount Dahldolf started by sending one ordonnanz after another to those he knew, all bearing the same message: “My wife went to the Noble’s Quarter ahead of me, but I cannot seem to find her. Do you know anything

about where she might be?” In the meantime, Ferdinand performed secret funerals for the three deceased, then used the feystones taken from their bodies to determine that Viscountess Dahldolf truly was among them.

Once all that was done, Viscount Dahldolf unlocked the viscountess’s hidden room as instructed, permitting us to search as we pleased. “Jeremias, assist them with their efforts. I shall continue with the ordonnanzes,” he said. It seemed that he needed to listen and reply to the many responses that were coming in.

We elected to tell Jeremias what we knew about Viscountess Dahldolf’s actions, hoping it might help with his search. He grimaced as he listened—and at one point even muttered, “What was she thinking...?” Then, once our debriefing was complete, he turned to me and said, “Lady Rozemyne, how does the bible look? I intend to order my servants to search as well, but I have never seen it up close. I imagine they would not recognize it either.”

I described its size and cover, among other things. The head attendant then gave his instructions to the servants, and a thorough search of the estate began.

“And what is the bible used for?” Jeremias asked. “That might have influenced where Viscountess Dahldolf chose to hide it.”

“Ceremonies, mostly. I can hold them without it, since I know the prayers by heart, but each duchy only has one bible, so I do not wish to lose it. Not to mention, my successor will need it for when they start memorizing the prayers. According to Egmont’s memories and the note left behind, she stole our bible simply to cause problems for us.”

“Does it have no other uses?”

Well, it also serves as a manual for becoming king... but that has nothing to do with me.

“Not that I know of,” I replied.

Jeremias frowned, and it was then that Ferdinand and the head attendant returned from their search. They had turned the entire estate upside down to find the bible, but to no avail. It had seemed likely that it would be here, since Viscountess Dahldolf clearly hadn’t expected us to notice the switch so soon, which made our lack of success all the more disappointing.

“It was likely moved elsewhere,” Ferdinand said, then looked at Jeremias. “Tell me, did the viscountess own a teleportation circle?”

“She did not, and we did not grant her permission to use the one entrusted to our house.”

To prevent assassinations and ambushes, only the archduke could place the kinds of teleportation circles used to transport people—and these circles were limited to travel within the duchy. Those used to

cross duchy borders, such as the ones that provided access to the Royal Academy, required the king's approval.

The circles used to teleport goods likewise couldn't move objects across duchy borders. It was possible to install ones that could, but doing so required the permission of the two duchies' archdukes, and it didn't seem to be something that happened all that much. The potential risk when generations passed and political circumstances changed was much too great.

Personal teleportation circles like the ones that Ferdinand used functioned a little differently—there were designated sending and receiving circles, meaning that goods could only be transported one way. On top of that, since the maker's mana was used on both sides, they could only be used with the sender's and receiver's permission. This and other restrictions were in place to prevent any dangerous items from being sent.

In short, even if the viscountess had used a teleportation circle she had acquired from somewhere, the bible would still be somewhere in Ehrenfest.

"Giebe Dahldolf, is there anyone your wife might have known who would need the bible, or anyone to whom she would entrust such a dangerous item?" Ferdinand asked. He had, of course, been investigating the former Veronica faction for quite some time, so I was sure that he already knew the answer to this question. His decision to ask anyway meant that this was probably a minor test of sorts to see whether the viscount really did intend to cooperate.

"Giebe Gerlach is the most likely candidate, I would say. Like my late wife, he is name-sworn to Lady Georgine. Her decision to steal the bible might even have been for Lady Georgine's sake, considering that she acted without our knowing. Giebe Gerlach was a scholar before he was a giebe, so he is most likely capable of making teleportation circles on his own."

"Indeed," Ferdinand replied with a satisfied nod; it seemed that Giebe Dahldolf's answer corresponded with his own intelligence. "That said, there are no teleportation circles to be found in her chambers, her hidden room, or the attendants' rooms, and the bible could not have been moved instantaneously without one. Do you have any ideas other than Giebe Gerlach?"

"My lady did not leave the estate even once after she returned," the head attendant interjected. "She had no meetings scheduled, and she did not see anyone from outside the estate. As her room does not have a balcony, I also find it reasonable to conclude that she did not sneak out on her highbeast."

His word, coupled with the responses to Viscount Dahldolf's ordonnances, was enough for us to conclude that she hadn't ventured

anywhere else after arriving at the estate. And given that Ferdinand had assigned knights to observe the premises after returning to the castle, we could be sure that she hadn't snuck out after the gate closed that day.

It had come to mind that perhaps she had gone somewhere immediately before making her way to the estate, but the time that Egmont had seen her leave and the time the head attendant maintained she had arrived were almost identical. She hadn't been unaccounted for for very long at all, and it would have been much too dangerous for her to be flying around with the bible in her possession.

There's no teleportation circle, and she didn't leave the estate... That seems unusually lax, especially when you consider how much she was doing before she went to the Noble's Quarter.

She had used her subordinates to stake out the Italian restaurant and the Gilberta Company, even going as far as to purchase cloth and the like. There must have been more to it than we realized. I returned my attention to the head attendant, thinking back on everything the viscountess had done.

"On another note, when did the Gilberta Company's cloth arrive?" I asked, remembering that there were still other things we needed to investigate. Finding out more about the cloth was at the top of my priority list, since it risked getting the lower city involved.

"The Gilberta Company's cloth?" the head attendant repeated.

"Yes. Someone whom we believe to have been Viscountess Dahldolf's servant purchased cloth dyed in the current fashion from the Gilberta Company. I'm wondering whether it has some connection to the bible incident, as it happened on the same day, and she was not known to buy from that store."

"Aah," he said. "The cloth arrived prior to my lady's return. A merchant came at around noon to deliver it. I did not recognize them, but they had a letter that bore my lady's handwriting, so I paid for and accepted the goods. The cloth was then taken by an attendant in the afternoon."

"Wait."

The viscountess had already returned to her estate by the afternoon. Had the attendant used the cloth to wrap up the bible? If so, then it was possible that the Gilberta Company would end up being indirectly dragged into this mess.

"This other attendant—where did they take the cloth?" I asked. "Is there not a chance that they relocated the bible with it?"

All eyes fell on the head attendant. He would have been the one to summon the carriage, and indeed, his response came without any hesitation. "I recall that they were headed to the castle."

"The castle?!"

My eyes shot open. Would they really have taken the bible to the castle? Maybe they had needed to do something with the cloth first. I continued to ponder the situation when Jeremias looked up with a start.

"I... I understand. It's a gift to celebrate Lord Ferdinand's marriage."

"What...?"

"By delivering the cloth to the castle as a gift for Lord Ferdinand, they can have it sent to Ahrensbach without suspicion. This method circumvents the need for a teleportation circle and for the desired goods to pass through Giebe Gerlach. If one wishes to deliver the bible to Lady Georgine, this is the most discreet solution."

Ferdinand, a member of our archducal family, was marrying into another duchy. Ahrensbach had sent us an abundance of gifts in celebration of the special occasion, and Ehrenfest was going to be sending them gifts in turn. As I understood it, there was a room in the castle where offerings from various giebels and nobles sent before winter socializing were being stored.

"Cloth dyed in Ehrenfest's style would make for a suitable wedding gift," Jeremias continued, "and since it is considered a gift for women, it will doubtless be delivered to Lady Detlinde or Lady Georgine rather than Aub Ahrensbach or Lord Ferdinand."

We had already sold the production method for rinsham, and it was now common practice for hairpins to be gifted for one's graduation ceremony and taken straight to the Royal Academy. This cloth, however, was a new trend—and unlike sweets, it wouldn't spoil while being stored in the castle. Jeremias explained that the viscountess could have simply prepared a box large enough to also store the bible and that, because cloth was such a normal present for a groom to give his bride, it wouldn't draw any suspicion.

That reminds me—back when I tried to gift cloth to Aurelia, Brunhilde told me it was a more fitting present for Lamprecht to give.

I swiftly rose to my feet and said, "I am off to the castle." We finally had a lead, and I wasn't going to waste any time.

Ferdinand sent an ordonnanz to a castle scholar, informing them that we would soon be arriving to check the wedding presents. I was accompanying him so that I could search the room for cloth from the Gilberta Company. We had ordered some guards to stay at the Dahldolf estate to watch the viscount and the others while they continued to search for clues.

And so, we went to Ferdinand's office in the castle. Waiting for us there was a scholar I had never met. He was one of Ferdinand's retainers who helped at the castle but never came to the temple.

"I have with me the key to the room containing the gifts," the

scholar said. "If you would only order it, we could check them all on your behalf. I understand that you are tremendously busy." He looked rather dissatisfied about Ferdinand doing such work himself, so he was probably aiding me in my valiant quest to reduce his workload.

Ferdinand shook his head. "The aub has informed me that many gifts have arrived already. I must thank the senders during winter socializing and offer them gifts in return, and while checking them all will be no small task, I cannot respond sincerely unless I do. Now is the perfect opportunity to begin, as there are no temple ceremonies to preoccupy me," he explained, wearing a fake smile. He took the key from the scholar and then piled some documents before him.

"Rozemyne and Justus will accompany me. You may focus on this in the meantime."

"Lord Ferdinand, why is Lady Rozemyne allowed to go when I am not?" the scholar asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Because of my own selfish request," I replied. "I wish to prepare gifts for Lady Detlinde and Lady Letizia, but I am concerned that I might send them something they have already received from a giebe. As such, I asked to see what my competition is offering. I apologize for how hasty this must all seem, but there is not much time before I must return to the Royal Academy."

Ferdinand nodded, said that we had no more time to waste, then started making his way to the room containing the gifts. I followed after him, though I couldn't help but glance back at the scholar as we went. He was slumped over a little, looking dejected as he picked up the first sheet of paperwork.

"I... feel kind of bad for him," I said. "He has to work all alone."

"There is no helping that," Ferdinand replied. "Or are you volunteering to explain the full circumstances to him if we find what we are seeking?"

"I know, I know..."

I walked alongside Ferdinand—in Lessy, of course—until we arrived at our destination. Justus used the key he had received from Ferdinand to open the door for us, revealing one towering stack of presents after another.

"There are so many boxes," I wisely observed.

"They keep the gifts from being stained while being loaded into carriages," Ferdinand replied. Using boxes was also ideal when it came to storage, as it allowed for the gifts to be stacked as they were now. "Let us begin. I am relying on you to recognize the cloth we are looking for."

I was in charge of checking the cloth, since I was the most familiar with the kinds available from the Gilberta Company. My retainers brought me one box after another, while Ferdinand checked who each

one was from.

“Stack the boxes we have checked over here,” I said. “Take care not to mix them with the ones we have yet to open.”

My guard knights continued passing the boxes along like a well-oiled machine, while Ferdinand checked the contents of each one and Justus kept notes. I was brought in for a closer look only when we found cloth of the new style. None were dyed in the style we were trying to find, although some pieces were quite similar, but then—

“Ferdinand, here! This cloth is from the Gilberta Company!” I shouted. It had the same floral print that Mom used and was the divine color of summer so that it could be made into a timely outfit when it was delivered in the spring.

“Light poison checks have already been carried out, but give it a closer inspection before touching anything. It may be smeared with the same poison that was used on the fake bible,” Ferdinand noted, so my guard knights began a more thorough examination under Hartmut’s instruction.

“He remembered everything I taught him...” Justus muttered, impressed.

After confirming that the cloth wasn’t poisoned, I tried to remove it from the box—but that was easier said than done.

“I-It’s so heavy...”

The cloth was wrapped around something so big and heavy that I couldn’t even get it out of the box. In the end, Leonore and Angelica had to take it out and unwrap it for me.

“Oh...?”

I had expected to find the bible inside, but instead, the cloth was peeled away to reveal...

“A wooden box.”

“This box has a surprising amount of weight to it for something used just for wrapping cloth around. There must be something inside,” Leonore remarked. She opened up the box to reveal another layer of protective cloth, and inside that was a very familiar sight.

“My bible!” I exclaimed.

“Let us check it for poison first, Lady Rozemyne,” Angelica said, stopping me in my tracks before I could grab it.

“Did you forget that the last ‘bible’ you saw was tampered with?” Leonore asked, adding to my lecture. It seemed that I had no choice but to be patient.

“The bible is now safe to touch, Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut said when the checks were finally complete. He then eased the book into my arms.

I examined its cover and front page, took a big sniff, and then hugged it to my chest. “It looks like it, smells like it, feels like it... This

is absolutely my bible,” I declared, then gazed up with a confident smile. Ferdinand was staring back at me in open disgust.

“That you distinguish books by their smell is rather off-putting.”

Excuse me?!

“I disagree,” I protested. “It shows just how close I am with them.”

“If you insist. I do not care enough to discuss this further,”

Ferdinand said, waving me away with a sigh. “In any case, I must admit, their plot was especially elaborate this time.”

“Had this bible been found in Ahrensbach, people would have thought that you stole it, Ferdinand.”

He slowly shook his head. “No, it would have been seen as an Ehrenfest plot to make Ahrensbach seem like thieves.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anymore. We’ve crushed their plot either way.” We had successfully recovered the bible, prevented the issue from reaching the public, and ensured that Ferdinand wouldn’t receive the blame. “Still, we have nothing connecting this to Lady Georgine, do we?”

“As it stands, Viscountess Dahldolf masterminded the entire plot; we have no evidence connecting her to Ahrensbach. If not for Egmont’s ring, we would not even be able to prove Giebe Gerlach’s involvement.”

There was no mistaking that Georgine was pulling the strings here, but man, what a pain it was dealing with her. She was exceedingly cautious and annoyingly tricky.

“You are right, though—we have found the bible,” Ferdinand continued. “Our names have not been besmirched, and we avoided a potential assassination. Plus, now that we have recovered this cloth, the Gilberta Company will not face any repercussions. There is also the fact that the next Giebe Dahldolf will be swearing his name to the aub, so all in all, I suppose this incident was actually to our benefit?”

“And remember, it’s all because I noticed that something was off,” I said. I hadn’t been of much use beyond that, so I wanted to stress my essential contribution to our glorious victory. “Feel free to shower me with praise.”

“Your phrasing makes me reluctant to acknowledge your assistance at all, but, well... indeed.”

“That doesn’t feel much like praise...”

“You simply acted as anyone trying to avoid punishment would. It is hardly worth my acclaim.”

Despite my best efforts, Ferdinand refused to give me even a word of genuine praise. At the very least, I could take pride in knowing that I had retrieved both the bible and the Gilberta Company’s cloth without incident. Our work here wasn’t done, though; Ferdinand got me to help him check all the remaining gifts, and only then did we

return to the temple.

“Use the key to open the bible and confirm its authenticity,” Ferdinand said.

“Right.”

I reregistered my mana to the key and then opened the bible with ease—which was proof enough that the key was real. I was then able to confirm the authenticity of the bible, as the usual text and magic circle rose into the air. We wasted no time in reporting our findings to Sylvester and Viscount Dahldolf.

“We have recovered the bible,” I said. “We have also found the Gilberta Company’s cloth, so they are no longer at risk of getting mixed up in noble affairs.”

Dealing with the name-swearing and punishments was Sylvester’s job, so I was going to leave all that to him. I was sure that the Dahldolfs wouldn’t be disciplined too seriously, since they had done everything in their power to help us find the bible and told us some valuable information about the Ahrensbach-leaning nobles.

“I am glad to see you have retrieved the bible. I was starting to worry,” Fran said, breaking into a smile when he saw me. He had been on tenterhooks waiting for my return. I gave him a big nod, then hugged the book to my chest again.

“Welcome home, my bible.”

A Change of Plans

And so, the autumn coming-of-age ceremony ended without incident. I had expected that some noble or other would come to check on the bible, but it seemed that Egmont had been in charge of overseeing matters in the temple. A letter from his home family arrived asking whether I had been able to open and use the bible during the coming-of-age ceremony.

“Ferdinand, what should we do with this?” I asked.

“Pen a response in Egmont’s name stating that you simply brought the bible to the ceremony and did not attempt to open it. I look forward to seeing how many nobles fall for it this winter,” Ferdinand said, his lips curving into a grin. Hartmut nodded in agreement, saying that they needed to eliminate all the nobles who posed a threat to me in one fell swoop.

That may be so, but I think Hartmut is the most dangerous of them all.

I had Monika write a response as if she were Egmont’s attendant. It was a magic letter, so when I placed it inside its envelope after checking the text, it turned into an ivory bird and flew away.

“I need to go back to the castle and prepare for winter socializing as soon as the winter baptisms are complete,” I said, “but when I think about the danger of nobles sneaking in again... I fear for the temple.”

Even after we were gone, nobles from the south were going to be passing through the temple on their way to the castle. There was a chance that one of them would attempt something again, so I decided to have Damuel stay back in the temple until the last possible moment. Ferdinand and I had been called to a meeting of the archducal family, so we needed to leave for the castle as soon as the winter baptisms were over.

This meeting would center around us telling the higher-ups of the Knight’s Order what we had learned from Viscount Dahldolf, and finalizing our plans for the winter purge. It was being held in secret, so we were limited to one retainer of each field—specifically those with the tightest lips. In my case, I was bringing Hartmut, Rihyarda, and Cornelius.

Sylvester began explaining his plans for the winter purge, and which nobles he intended to detain. Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior listened in complete shock, having not been privy to the purge before

this point. I could see their retainers tense up as well. Sylvester then went on to note that a far greater number of members of the former Veronica faction had given their names than expected.

“Father,” Wilfried said with a tense expression, “what do you plan to do with the nobles who no longer have names to give?”

Given how many former Veronica faction members had thus far refused to change sides, one could easily deduce that there were more name-sworn among them than an Ehrenfest person would ever have guessed.

“I intend to spare those who gave their names to Veronica, the former first wife—as long as they are not involved in any wrongdoing,” Sylvester replied. Veronica had not brought their name-sworn feystones with her to the Ivory Tower, meaning there was no risk of her giving new orders. Sylvester had thus determined that it was best not to treat them any differently than the nobles who hadn’t given their names.

“Um, would it be possible to have Lady Veronica return their names?” I asked. It was sure to be an option; I remembered hearing that Ferdinand had tried to give Eckhart and the others their names back when entering the temple.

“Rozemyne, do you think she would give up her forever loyal servants so lightly?” Ferdinand replied, shooting down my idea in a heartbeat. “She would only use the opportunity to give troublesome orders or speak in a code we would not understand.”

“Not to mention, those name stones are most likely in Mother’s hidden room,” Sylvester added. “We could open the door if she climbs to the distant heights, but in that scenario, her name-sworn will already have climbed with her. We don’t want more deaths than are needed, and if they swear to serve Ehrenfest, that’ll suffice for me. However”—there was a sudden glint in his dark-green eyes—“those who are name-sworn to my sister are another story. Georgine is the first wife of Ahrensbach, which means those sworn to her will be working for her duchy, not ours. Nobles who can’t defy treasonous orders are nothing but dangerous to Ehrenfest. I want to save as many children forced into their faction as I can, but I have no mercy for those who gave their name to Georgine.”

I recalled Viscount Dahldolf saying that his parents had ordered him to give his name. One could imagine there were many who had similarly been forced to give their names to Georgine during her last visit. The faces of the former Veronica faction’s children flashed through my mind.

Will everyone be okay...?

“Considering that everyone could enter Rozemyne’s shield during last year’s attack at the awards ceremony, we know there are none

among the children who are hostile toward the archducal family,” Sylvester continued. “There are some we plan to execute for the crime of association, which must be done if we are to keep our authority stable, but I’m trying to save as many lives as possible. I want you all to convince the children to give their names to the archducal family so they aren’t punished alongside their parents.”

Those of us in the Ehrenfest Dormitory all worked hand in hand at the Royal Academy, and I wanted to ensure that the bonds we had formed weren’t destroyed by the purge. Wilfried and Charlotte both nodded in response to Sylvester, firm resolve in their eyes.

“I will do everything I can to save them,” Wilfried said.

“As will I, Father,” Charlotte agreed.

“I concur that we should have the children at the Royal Academy make this decision for themselves,” I said, “but what of the children who are not yet students?”

Florencia smiled. “I intend to handle the winter playroom. We will take them into our care and give them homes in the castle’s knight dormitory. There we will explain the crimes their parents have committed and the dangers of treason, then give them the choice to either be executed by association or live in the dormitory with the others.”

Children too young to attend the Royal Academy couldn’t make the feystones necessary to give their names, so there was no need to worry about them being sworn to someone else. Furthermore, as they had already been baptized, they had the magic tools and rings necessary to survive as nobles. Florencia explained that if we just looked after them for the few years before they were due to enter the Royal Academy, then they would be able to start apprentice work and earn an income, from which point they could pretty much live independently as proper nobles.

Those who had surviving family members could perhaps be taken in by them, but Florencia’s plans meant that even those who didn’t would be able to get by. That made me feel relieved at first, but then I found myself thinking of the children who wouldn’t be included.

“What about those who have yet to be baptized?” I asked. “I know we cannot officially recognize them as children of Ehrenfest, but their survival will greatly determine how many nobles we will have in a few years’ time.”

“Well, we don’t know how many of them exist, so we haven’t thought that much about them,” Sylvester replied. “There may be nobles willing to adopt those with especially high mana, but most won’t want anything to do with the children of nobles executed for treason. Not to mention, it’ll be hard to raise really young kids without a mother.”

Newborns weren't officially registered as children until they were baptized. Some, like Konrad, had their magic tool stolen from them in their own homes, and others were never given one at all, so it was impossible to predict how many existed. Sylvester said that the castle had no need for those who wouldn't become nobles, so saving their lives simply wasn't a priority.

"As it stands, we can't know how much manpower or funding we'd need to raise them, nor whether they'd have enough mana to become nobles in the first place. We should treat those who haven't been baptized as if they were never born."

"Could I take them to the temple orphanage, then? Those without magic tools could survive by giving mana to the divine instruments, and rituals would become easier with more mana at hand. It's very possible that we will end up losing blue priests during this purge, depending on how it affects their houses."

"Blue priests, huh...? They hadn't crossed my mind," Sylvester said. That was probably because most nobles didn't view blue priests as fellow members of the nobility.

"This is my opinion as the High Bishop, but if we lose any more blue priests, the temple will suffer both financially and in terms of mana. At the very least, I would like some children with mana to replace them."

By working together, Wilfried, Charlotte, and I were able to make up for the mana shortage that had resulted from our duchy losing so many blue priests and shrine maidens after the civil war. However, we were soon to lose Ferdinand, and we still needed to find a way to fill the hole that his absence would create. Losing too many blue priests now, of all times, would prove especially problematic.

"And where would we find the money to support them?" Sylvester asked. "This is an expensive idea you're putting forward. I don't think you'd want to take so many kids at once."

I smiled. "We can simply take the funds from the estates of the purged parents. There should not be any problem in using the wealth of the children's houses to support them once they have moved to the temple, no?"

"Well... you're not wrong. I trust that you won't waste the money, so consider it yours," Sylvester said, agreeing to the idea despite not seeming too enthusiastic about it.

"If we raise them in the orphanage, they will receive a mednoble-level education up until their baptisms. Naturally, without the magic tools given to newly born children, they will find it difficult to live as nobles... but I believe we could reward the children who excel with special funding and baptize them into the nobility."

My suggestion was that they could be baptized without parents,

instead having the archduke or orphanage director as their guardian, then take up residence in the castle dormitory to learn the ways of the nobility.

“What about those who don’t excel?” Sylvester asked.

“As long as they have mana, they can fuel magic tools. They may not be able to live as nobles, but they can devote their mana to the divine instruments within the temple. If you, Aub Ehrenfest, were to pay them an amount equivalent to what current blue priests receive, then they should not struggle to get by.”

There was no need for them to have the same living standards as the current blue priests. We could have them live in the orphanage and dedicate their mana, as Bezewanst had intended for me to do; and if we were receiving funding from the castle and could provide them with the necessary chefs and carriages, they would be able to perform Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival without issue.

“And in the potential event of there being enough blue priests that the divine instruments become full, we can have them take on other mana-related tasks such as teleporting my books or writing magic letters,” I continued. “My intention is for the lower-city merchants to one day start hiring the orphans.”

If we gave the orphans work involving mana, then it was possible for them to live as commoners. There was no need for the innocent pre-baptism children to die by association, and we didn’t need to go through the trouble of ensuring they were raised as nobles.

“I see. So you *do* think matters through on occasion,” Ferdinand said. I pursed my lips at his very rude remark, but it was hard to argue back, since I really did tend to be thoughtless.

“Alright,” Sylvester said. “If you can handle it, then you can look after the pre-baptism children in the orphanage.”

“I much appreciate it,” I replied—and it was then that a scholar requested entry to the room. They were allowed in, and silence fell as we all waited to hear what they had to say.

“Aub Ehrenfest, we have received an urgent letter from Aub Ahrensbach,” the scholar said. We had been in the middle of discussing the mass execution of the duchy’s Ahrensbach-leaning nobles, so the uncanny timing of this message made us all fearfully apprehensive. “He requests a response at once.”

Sylvester took the letter with a hard frown and wasted no time reading through it. By the time he was done, his brows were deeply knit, and his complexion had changed entirely. He slowly looked up at Ferdinand.

“Aub Ehrenfest, if the letter relates to me, may I request your permission to read it?” Ferdinand asked.

Sylvester paused for a moment and then said, “You may.”

Ferdinand read through it, then let out a deep sigh and started tapping a finger against his temple. My heart stirred with unease; that was how he reacted to troubling news. Ahrensbach was already causing enough problems for us—what else could they possibly be doing?

Sylvester squeezed his eyes shut, then gave Ferdinand a look that was completely devoid of emotion. “We have three days to respond. I want to refuse it myself... but I will leave the decision to you.”

“I am grateful. I will consider this carefully.”

“Ferdinand, what did it say?” I asked, grabbing his sleeve once the meeting was over and everyone was moving to leave.

Ferdinand remained silent for a moment, scanning our surroundings, then shook his head. “I suppose I cannot act as though it does not involve you.” He directed me to come to his office, so I made my way there with Hartmut, Rihyarda, and Cornelius in tow.

“It seems that Aub Ahrensbach’s health is already much worse than expected. He has asked me to depart at once, if possible, such that he can introduce me to his duchy’s nobles over the winter and ensure that we get along.”

“He wants you to leave even earlier? We were given so little time to begin with...”

Considering how long engagement periods usually lasted, Ahrensbach was already being very selfish and unreasonable in its expectations. Shortening the time frame even further was ridiculous.

“He made a point of saying that I should come ‘if possible,’ which gives us room to refuse him if we so wish. That said, I am very much of the opinion that I should leave for Ahrensbach sooner rather than later.”

“Why’s that?”

“First, I have already gathered everything necessary to execute Georgine’s name-sworn nobles: the details of their living situations, reasons to purge them, and evidence of their crimes. The aub and those of the Knight’s Order can manage the rest without me. The handover in the temple is largely finished as well. My leaving will complicate things somewhat, but not enough to prevent our success. Second, I sense that Georgine aims to distance me from Ehrenfest before we follow up our suspicions of Gerlach. Viscountess Dahldolf’s disappearance has already become common knowledge among the nobility, and the kidnapped gray priests never reached their destination, so Georgine will have deduced that something unexpected occurred.”

She would doubtless conclude that Ferdinand was responsible for

their attack on the temple ending in failure—and she would, of course, be correct. He had made a show of proving his involvement when both searching Egmont's memories and going to Viscount Dahldolf's estate.

"She has been approaching this with great caution from the start," Ferdinand continued. "I cannot say how much information her side has acquired, but I expect that their goal is to remove me from the picture, since they see me as having destroyed their plots one after another. Little do they know that the credit actually belongs to you."

They were probably under the impression that removing Ferdinand from Ehrenfest would make things easy for them, and in truth, I really couldn't blame them. The most I had done was notice that something was amiss; Ferdinand had taken care of the rest.

"We're dealing with a woman who lays devious, multilayered traps," I said. "The last thing I want is for you to be stuck so close to someone like that."

"Our move to the offensive has always been inevitable. Here in Ehrenfest, I can do nothing but defend, meaning that Georgine's onslaught will never cease. But in Ahrensbach, I can keep an eye on her, send intelligence, and work to forestall attacks."

As it stood, we had so few connections in Ahrensbach that there was nothing we could do to fight back. Ferdinand was right when he said that being cautious would mean unending trouble for us.

"But still... you don't have to leave right away. Can't we wait until spring?"

"By then, it will already be too late. Aub Ahrensbach is in danger, and I believe he speaks the truth when he says that he wishes to help me form noble connections in his duchy while he still can."

Aub Ahrensbach could introduce Ferdinand to all sorts of nobles—which was exactly what we needed right now. It was only a matter of time before the archduke ascended the towering stairway to the distant heights, and, when he did, Georgine's power would swell significantly, and the strength of someone like Ferdinand, who was marrying in from another duchy, would wane. Finding friends among the Ahrensbach nobles was crucial, and the winter when they all gathered to socialize was the best opportunity for this.

"If the first wife's power becomes too great, then there is a chance that I will not be able to act when it matters most," Ferdinand continued. "But the greatest reason for me to spend the winter in Ahrensbach is that Detlinde will not be there. She will, as you know, be at the Royal Academy, meaning that I will be able to move freely without her interference. I was so busy babysitting her during her summer visit that I was unable to keep an eye on Georgine's movements, and the same will be true when we are both in

Ahrensbach. I cannot overstate the benefits of my being there in Detlinde's absence."

"I take it you've already made up your mind, then..."

"Indeed," Ferdinand replied. "There is... one thing that gives me pause, but if we are able to resolve it, then I should go."

There was no point trying to stop Ferdinand when he had already made his decision—but at the very least, I could try to help him with his problem. I gazed up at him and said, "What's giving you pause?"

"My early departure will force us to call you back for the Dedication Ritual. I had hoped that you would be able to spend an entire term at the Royal Academy, but this would put all that to ruin." He spoke with a frown, but I didn't see this as much of an issue. It was already a yearly tradition for me to return for the Dedication Ritual; there was no point in him worrying when everything was already so disastrous.

"Don't worry, Ferdinand," I replied—and then realized that Hartmut had said the exact same thing at the exact same time. "I'm used to it anyway, so..."

I quickly trailed off, realizing that although we had started our responses the same, Hartmut was now saying something else entirely. "We intend to detain many mana-rich criminals this year, and there are many blue priests who are very enthusiastic about assisting me," he continued. "The ritual can be completed without incident if everyone is given feystones and rejuvenation potions—and if even that is not enough, I will acquire the necessary assistance." He then turned to me with a bright smile and declared, "Lady Rozemyne, you may enjoy your stay at the Royal Academy. I will ensure that the blue priests complete the ritual one way or another."

"I can't help feeling that I should return anyway..." I replied. I was starting to worry more for the blue priests than anyone else.

"No, there will be no need for that," Ferdinand interjected, waving away my attempted protest. "Hartmut says that he will do it for your sake, so there is no mistaking that it will be done."

Ferdinand then told Hartmut that he would entrust the Dedication Ritual to him—a sure sign of the trust that had developed between them. Ferdinand definitely wouldn't have entrusted the ritual to me...

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand continued, "assuming that you and the temple have no cause to object, I will be going to Ahrensbach. They have said that accommodation has already been prepared for me, but of course, it would be foolish of me to accept those words at face value. My apologies for asking this when you are already so busy, but could you take my luggage to the border gate? Having access to your highbeast during the three days that remain will save us much time compared to using carriages. I wish to use that extra leeway to

prepare as many potions and magic tools as possible.”

“...Understood. I will do what I can,” I replied. His mind was made up, and it was only natural that I should do everything in my power to assist him.

“Appreciated.”

Now that his departure was decided, Ferdinand sprang into action. He got his estate attendant to write his response, then ordered that clothes and other such daily necessities be prepared. From there, he sent an ordonnanz to Sylvester, confirming that he was leaving Ehrenfest, but emphasizing that a reply was not to be sent back for three days.

The ordonnanz soon returned with a response, after which Ferdinand contacted me with his schedule for moving his luggage and informed me that we needed to go to the temple to prepare. Meanwhile, Hartmut contacted my temple attendants.

“Rozemyne has my permission to accompany you,” the ordonnanz said in Sylvester’s voice. “Be careful. You’re going into enemy territory.”

“Indeed,” Ferdinand replied; I could tell from the sardonic look on his face that he thought Sylvester was stating the obvious. A second ordonnanz then arrived, this time for me.

“Rozemyne,” came Sylvester’s voice once again, “check with Rihyarda and Elvira to make sure Ferdinand’s luggage isn’t missing anything. He needs a woman’s perspective, which he’s never had.”

Ferdinand grimaced at that, while I pursed my lips. “Is he insinuating that I’m not good enough to provide a woman’s perspective on my own?” I asked.

“Ah. He has a point.”

So mean!

After flatly saying that I wasn’t capable enough, Ferdinand turned to Rihyarda behind me. “I require your assistance. May I ask you to look over the gifts I intend to bring to Ahrensbach? I do not have space for many, but I will at least need some. I have with me a thrown-together list describing which items are for whom that you may use.” He then took out the list in question and handed it to her, saying that she could consult his scholars if she needed anything else.

“You may count on me, Ferdinand, my boy. Though... no, now that you’re engaged, I suppose ‘Lord Ferdinand’ is more appropriate.”

Ferdinand met this remark with wide eyes.

“I always thought it would be a joyous occasion when I changed how I addressed you,” Rihyarda continued with a melancholic smile. “Never did I think that your departure would make me so anxious and concerned.”

“I also am surprised to find that I would rather you continue calling me ‘boy’...” Ferdinand replied with a wry smile, then turned away from her. “I must close off my temple workshop. After that, I will put together the luggage at my estate. Apologies, but I must leave the gift sorting to you.”

“Understood, Lord Ferdinand.”

Preparing to Leave

Upon our arrival at the temple, Ferdinand briskly put away his highbeast and then began power walking to his chambers. I called out for him to wait.

“Ferdinand, you need the time-stopping magic tool. We need to fill it with tasty meals and sweets for you to take to Ahrensbach.”

“Do you truly intend to prepare that much food over the next few days...?”

“Obviously. You tend to put off eating when you’re busy. I imagine you’ve already cut out meals from the luggage you’ll be bringing with you to Ahrensbach, haven’t you?”

Ferdinand said nothing and merely stared at me through narrowed eyes. I had evidently hit the nail on the head.

“I will prepare the food,” I continued, “so simply lend me the time-stopping magic tool.”

“Justus will fetch it later. Satisfied?”

I watched Ferdinand stride off and start directing his attendants while I put away my own highbeast, then asked Fran to go to the orphanage and workshop to summon my attendants. In the meantime, I returned to my High Bishop’s chambers with Monika, whereupon I got her and Nicola to help me change.

“Nicola, I request a feast of meals and snacks,” I announced. “We need to make enough to fill the time-stopping magic tool before Ferdinand leaves. I intend to ask the Italian restaurant for support, but I expect our kitchen to be working at maximum capacity as well.”

“Understood,” Nicola replied, racing to the kitchen without a moment’s hesitation.

At once, I started writing letters to the lower city. By the time I was just about finished, my attendants had gathered in my room.

“Gil, deliver this to Benno,” I said. “I wish to know of the progress Zack has made on the bench that Ferdinand ordered. This is for the Gilberta Company. I wish to buy the highest-quality hairpin they have—one that Ferdinand can give to Lady Letizia, that will suit hair as golden as Lady Detlinde’s. And this is a request for the Othmar Company. Please ask them to assist us in preparing the High Priest’s meals and sweets.”

“Understood.”

I asked Fritz to prepare books and instructional materials to give

to Letizia, while I informed Wilma of the very high chance that the orphanage would receive an abundance of new children over the winter. In the meantime, Rosina was transcribing new songs for me. My intention had been to complete them in secret at the Royal Academy where Ferdinand wasn't around, but there wouldn't be any time for that now. Rosina was focusing on the melody; Ferdinand could arrange them himself at a later date.

The next day, the time-stopping magic tool was brought to the High Bishop's chambers, and we began packing it full of sweets from the Othmar Company and the meals that Hugo and Ella had prepared. Justus poison-tested each dish and carefully noted down what it contained.

By third bell, the attendants of the High Priest's chambers were coming in and out of my room, transporting boxes from Ferdinand's workshop to mine. A response from Benno arrived a short while later, explaining that the bench had yet to be upholstered with tear-resistant cloth and was thus not complete. It was due to be finished at some point during the winter.

I made my way to the High Priest's chambers to report this information and provide my usual assistance, but Ferdinand was nowhere to be seen. There were fewer attendants in his room as well, since there was so much to be done before his departure.

"Eckhart, where is Ferdinand?" I asked.

"Lord Ferdinand is cleaning up his workshop," he replied. "Thus far, he has left only to bring out boxes, but you can call for him if you have something urgent to discuss. You might even want to help him."

He then pointed at the magic tool used to speak with those inside the hidden room. I asked for permission to enter so that I could deliver my report, and soon enough, Ferdinand poked his head out to listen. Before I could even speak, however, Eckhart pushed me through the doorway.

"Lord Ferdinand, it seems that Rozemyne enthusiastically wishes to assist you in your workshop," he said.

"What? I never..." I was about to complain, but Eckhart fixed me with an overwhelmingly imposing smile that stopped me dead in my tracks. "Eep. Yes, that's right. Please allow me to help."

Ferdinand told me to enter, and together we started cleaning up paperwork and such while I delivered my report on the meals I had prepared, the hairpin, the instructive materials, and finally, the letter from Benno.

"In short, I will send the completed bench and new dishes to you in spring. In the meantime, please enjoy all of the meals we've prepared for you," I said, determined to make him eat healthily.

Ferdinand thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No, there is no need for that. You can keep the bench.”

“But... why?” I asked, blinking in surprise. The bench was being made for him because he had shown so much interest in the mattress. I absolutely wanted him to have it in Ahrensbach; its comfortable cushion would give him somewhere to relax.

There was a brief silence before Ferdinand said, “I fear that anything I bring with me to Ahrensbach might be taken away. I would rather you keep it than have it end up with someone else.” He looked particularly displeased, as though he were remembering a particularly distasteful memory.

There was nothing I could say in response; I was in no position to reassure him that nothing like that would happen in Ahrensbach.

“Furthermore... will you not need a place to relax once you lose the bench you have been using for support?” Ferdinand asked.

“Hm?”

I already had a bench in my room; it hadn’t been lost, and I didn’t expect to lose it either. I gazed up at Ferdinand, not understanding what he meant, and in response he let out a weary sigh.

“You are the one who compared me to a bench. Consider this cushioned variety to be my replacement.” He flicked me on the forehead and said, “Don’t make me say it, fool,” then picked up a box and started toward the door.

I watched him leave, unsure how I was ever meant to guess these things when he was so cryptic and indirect. The more I thought about it, however, the more I realized that he had guided and protected me ever since I first entered the temple.

I’ve always felt so much more comfortable with him there for me to lean on...

All of my memories since I first joined the temple flashed through my mind. Ferdinand was busy with needing to depart so suddenly, but he was still showing me so much consideration, leaving me things out of nothing but kindness. The thought made my heart ache.

Even during the brief moments when Ferdinand exited the workshop—when he was out of my sight—it felt as though he had disappeared for good. Soon, I wouldn’t have him protectively standing in front of me anymore. I would need to walk my own path without any guidance, and that realization sent another pang through my chest.

“Rozemyne, put those documents together,” Ferdinand said, returning as soon as he had placed the box outside. Just seeing his face again filled me with such overwhelming relief that tears began to blur my vision.

I don’t need a replacement bench, so please... wait until spring before

you leave.

As much as I wanted to say that, I couldn't. It was too selfish to ever pass my lips. I swallowed the words and wiped my eyes.

"Rozemyne, is something wrong?" Ferdinand asked.

"Ferdinand... since you have so little time before you have to go, shouldn't you remove the restriction on who can enter your workshop?" I asked, deciding to be useful instead.

"That is not a bad idea," he replied, then promptly removed the restriction. Since others could now enter his workshop, I was promptly shooed out; there was little need for someone so short and weak. I merely shrugged as Eckhart took my place and gleefully began assisting Ferdinand.

The luggage was separated into that which was due to be taken to Ahrensbach and that which needed to be taken to my workshop. Ferdinand had already made some progress with clearing out his workshop, but there was still a lot to be done.

"I will need to clean up my estate as well, and my aim is to have it all finished today," Ferdinand said, causing the attendants from his chambers to widen their eyes. Clearing out this messy workshop they had never even seen before was going to be hard enough, and then there was the matter of their usual duties.

"Your attendants can't do this alone, Ferdinand. There's not enough time," I said. "Let me call the gray priests from the orphanage to help."

"What point is there in summoning those whom you have no intention of making into attendants?"

"There is no need to take them as attendants; we can reward them another way. Monika, I ask that you go to the orphanage and summon ten or so gray priests who seem suited for physical labor."

"Understood," Monika replied, then turned on her heel and made her way to the orphanage.

I returned my attention to Ferdinand, who seemed taken aback, and gave a small smile. "How about you entrust the boxes you don't want others to touch to Eckhart and your attendants, while the gray priests carry the rest?"

Ferdinand paused and then said, "You truly are skilled at delegating work to others."

"Of course. There really isn't much I can do on my own; I'm always relying on the help of those more capable than me. You're talented enough to do pretty much anything by yourself, but I think you would do well to make more allies and trust them with things."

I racked my brain for a simple method that even Ferdinand could use to make allies. He was skilled in the art of protecting himself, but this defensiveness meant that he seldom allowed new people to get

close to him—and vice versa. He tried to resolve situations only with those he already trusted, but by this logic, Raimund was probably the only person from Ahrensbach whom he'd be able to rely on. I didn't want him falling back on Eckhart and Justus for everything.

"Ferdinand, since you are heading to Ahrensbach in the winter, when so many nobles are due to come together, why not play the harspiel to celebrate your arrival and gain the support of the gathered women?" I said. "It would be trivial for you, and your success is guaranteed—especially if you play a new song. Let's make the most of your voice, looks, and musical talent."

His harspiel concert here in Ehrenfest had won over more or less every woman in attendance, with many being overwhelmed to the point of swooning. Surely it was worth a try in Ahrensbach too.

"Oh, by the way—I've had some sweets prepared as well," I continued. "You're going to be educating Lady Letizia, so I'd suggest rewarding her with some whenever she succeeds at something. And remember to praise her. You'll discourage her from growing if you do nothing but focus on her mistakes. Also, speak often with Lady Letizia's retainers about your education process. Don't lord over them with a plan you decided on yourself. And another thing—"

"Enough already. Take care of your own responsibilities," Ferdinand said, waving me away like a bothersome fly.

That dismissive remark simply wouldn't do. I had already arranged for all the things I wanted Ferdinand to take to Ahrensbach; all there was left to do now was wait. The food was almost ready, and Justus was more or less done with looking over what had arrived from the Othmar Company. There were also the items intended for Letizia—a hairpin, which I had ordered through Gil, and some educational material, which Fran was currently dealing with. Rosina had already finished transcribing the melody of my new songs and was now battling to arrange as much of them as she could.

"And what exactly are those responsibilities?" I asked. "I came to the temple to help you, didn't I?"

"Go to the book room with Fran and retrieve the books I've been keeping there."

"You're taking the books...?"

They were his, so it made complete sense that he would take them with him, but I was still sad to see them go.

I trudged to the book room with Fran. The lack of a furnace meant the air was frigid enough to give me goose bumps. I started pointing at the books that belonged to Ferdinand, and one by one, Fran unhooked the thick chains securing them to the reading desks. Each one was freed with a loud *clank*, and as I watched the pile grow taller and taller, I could feel my heart grow sadder and sadder.

Oh. That book...

We were standing in the first book room I had ever entered, and the books around us were the first ones I had been permitted to read at my leisure. But the particular book that Fran was currently holding...

“Is something the matter, Lady Rozemyne?” Fran asked.

“I simply recalled that the book in your hands is the first one I ever read after coming here.”

Indeed, the first book I had read on my first day as an apprentice blue shrine maiden belonged to Ferdinand.

Fran looked at the book, then gave a soft smile. “Ah, yes. I remember it like it was yesterday. You Crushed Gil when he came to inform you it was time for lunch and neglected to eat to the point that you collapsed.”

Zahm chuckled. “That was when the Gilberta Company came with her tithe. The High Priest truly was shocked. He checked on your health with Fran each and every day until you recovered and could return to the temple.”

“Ah,” I said. “Feel free to forget all about that. Both of you.”

Fran and Zahm carefully wrapped each of the unchained books in cloth as they continued reminiscing about their time with Ferdinand. Most of the memories they brought up were about him agonizing over my words and actions. Hearing them talking about nothing but my failures was honestly embarrassing. Surely they had some more flattering memories.

“Lady Rozemyne, please wait here with Monika,” Fran eventually said. “We shall deliver these to the High Priest.”

Instead of stacking the books and carrying several at once, it seemed that Fran and Zahm intended to carry them one at a time. Ferdinand had told me to help them, but the books he owned were much too thick and heavy for me to carry.

Once they had gone, I gazed around the book room—now a questionable name, I thought, considering how empty it felt.

“Mestionora is carved into the shelves, I see...” I mused aloud.

My eyes wandered to the bookshelves with a door that could only be opened with the High Bishop’s key, and I noticed that its decorative carvings were more elaborate than those on the surrounding shelves. They displayed a goddess cradling the Grutrisheit.

“I’ve seen these bookshelves so many times over the years, but I guess I never noticed anything but the books...”

“That is very much like you, Lady Rozemyne,” Monika said with a giggle. “The stories that Fran and Zahm told a moment ago were very interesting. I did not know much about you before you saved the

orphanage. In case you've yet to notice, there are engravings like these all throughout the temple."

It seemed that Monika had long since noticed the carvings on the book room's shelves. As it turned out, there were various gods hidden all over the temple in various places—although you weren't likely to notice them unless you were one of the people on cleaning and polishing duty.

"Our apologies for the wait, Lady Rozemyne. The High Priest has asked for you to prepare your highbeast."

Now that Fran and Zahm had finished moving the books, I needed to transport them to the Noble's Quarter. I exited the book room, returned to my chambers, and then got changed—after which Angelica, who was serving as my guard, came up to me.

"Lady Rozemyne, will you be returning to the castle after delivering the luggage to Lord Ferdinand's estate? I will be staying at the temple today, so you may have Damuel stay at the castle."

"In that case—Damuel, you may have tomorrow off," I said. "I assume you need to prepare for winter socializing."

"Thank you, my lady."

My guard knights wouldn't be able to prepare for winter socializing if they spent all their time with me in the temple. That was why I was sending Damuel home and staying only with Angelica for the time being.

"Speaking of which, have you finished your own preparations, Angelica?" I asked.

"Yes. Thanks to my strong little sister, I am fully ready."

"You really should learn to do things yourself. You can't expect Liesele to keep doing everything for you."

"To tell the truth, I agree," Angelica replied, placing an embarrassed hand on her cheek. It was the answer she gave whenever she knew that she *should* do something but didn't have the motivation. I had heard it from her numerous times before, and not once had she actually made an effort to improve afterward.

"At this rate, Angelica, you're going to be helpless when Liesele gets married."

"In other words, I won't have to worry for another couple of years."

"That isn't what I meant."

I gave up on convincing Angelica and instead produced my Pandabus at the front entrance—although given how much luggage we needed to transport, it was actually closer in size to a Pandatruck. Its door flumped open, and the gray priests began piling boxes inside.

"Ferdinand, I made my highbeast," I said.

"Then you may wait in front of a fireplace. Your health may have

improved, but it is still cold. You will take sick if not careful.”

I took a seat in front of the nearby fireplace and watched everyone work. Their pace was smooth due to the number of gray priests going in and out, all carrying boxes. I could see Justus directing several people inside who were carrying the time-stopping magic tool.

The priests took a short break for lunch, then got straight back to work. It wasn't long before Ferdinand's workshop was completely empty, with even the closets having been cleared of everything except blue robes.

Ferdinand closed the door to his hidden room, then placed a hand against it and started channeling mana. The feystone lost its color, eradicating his workshop entirely.

“My mana has thus been removed,” Ferdinand said. “You may do with this space as you please, Hartmut.”

“I am grateful,” Hartmut replied, then registered his mana with the door to create his own hidden room.

“I will now return to my estate, finish my packing there, and subsequently leave for Ahrensbach. I am not likely to return to this temple again. Clean these robes and ensure they are ready to be lent out if necessary.”

Ferdinand gave his blue robes to an attendant. It was strange to think it, but I would never again see him wearing the priestly attire I was so accustomed to. He put on his noble coat, then attached his blue cape.

“Do not daydream, Rozemyne. The luggage must be brought to my estate. We are leaving.”

“R-Right!”

We made our way to the front entrance where Lessy was waiting—and upon our arrival, we found that Ferdinand's temple attendants had all gathered to see him off. They were lined up and offering their prayers while his noble retainers began producing their highbeasts.

“High Priest, may the divine protections of the gods grace thee in thy new home. O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe—we offer you our prayers and gratitude.”

Ferdinand watched with an indescribable expression as the lined-up attendants knelt, crossed their arms, and bowed their heads. After a moment, the corners of his lips rose ever so slightly.

“This is my final order to all of you, who have served me so well: treat Hartmut as you have treated me, and support Rozemyne, the High Bishop.”

“As you wish.”

Ferdinand nodded at his attendants, then turned to Fran and Zahm, who had accompanied us. They were his former attendants whom he had sent to work for me. As I understood it, they had been chosen precisely because of their competence and the fact that Ferdinand trusted them without question.

“Fran, Zahm, I entrust Rozemyne to you both.”

Zahm was the first to kneel and bow his head in a show of deference. “I am honored, High Priest. Please take good care of yourself.”

Fran soon followed, adding a very emphatic “It is the highest honor to have served you.”

“I see...” Ferdinand said, allowing a warm smile to play on his lips. He turned away from the temple, deliberately flourishing his cape in the process, and climbed atop his highbeast. Then, after looking across his gathered attendants one last time, he flew up into the air. I gripped the wheel of my Pandabus and followed after his blue cape.

This is really it, then. The High Priest isn't the High Priest anymore...



After we arrived at Ferdinand's estate, Lessy was unloaded, and the luggage was taken to different rooms depending on whether it was to be kept here or transported to Ahrensbach. There wasn't much I could do to help them, so I simply waited around and sipped tea with Judithe as my guard. I would have liked to spend some more time in Ferdinand's book room, but some of the luggage apparently needed to be moved there, so he had told me that I would just get in the way.

It's kind of awkward sipping tea by myself while everyone else is working...

I continued to watch Ferdinand give instructions, and it was then that I realized something was off. "Ferdinand, what are you going to do about your cape?" I asked. "Will people not take issue with you wearing Dunkelfelger blue on your way to Ahrensbach? Do you intend to switch to Ehrenfest's color before you go?"

"I... had forgotten about that," Ferdinand admitted, furrowing his brow and tapping a finger against his temple. I remembered him saying that his new Ehrenfest cape didn't have any protective circles, so I couldn't imagine he would feel safe wearing it to Ahrensbach. He paused, a contemplative look on his face, and then said, "Rozemyne, make some ink in my workshop. We do not have time for embroidery. Drawing is our only option."

It certainly would have been a challenge to embroider complex magic circles when we had so little time to spare. Not to mention, writing the circles in disappearing ink would make it even harder for people to tell what charms the cape used, which was an added bonus.

"Wait—you want *my* ink?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because my own would react to my touch and reveal the circles—and you have nothing else to do. Damuel, stay with Rozemyne. Have her make the ink."

Damuel swapped places with Judithe so that he could instruct me, and from there, I was promptly relocated to the workshop in Ferdinand's estate.

"I don't mind, since I have nothing else to do, but this feels strange. Will magic circles written in someone else's ink actually function as charms?" I asked. As far as I knew, cape embroidering needed to be done by one's parents or spouse. Using ink wouldn't overrule such a fundamental fact.

"Magic circles that use the mana of another are not entirely dysfunctional," Damuel replied. "Using mana similar to one's own makes them drastically more effective, though."

"Oh, right. Ferdinand's cape belongs to someone else, but it clearly still works for him."

"Not to mention, Lord Ferdinand will only be wearing Ehrenfest

colors until his Starbinding. He will be wearing Ahrensbach colors after that, so perhaps he believes that something simple will suffice for now.”

I prepared the necessary ingredients for making ink while listening to Damuel; everything was very easy to find, as Ferdinand stored the same items in the same places in every workshop he owned. You could really feel his personality here.

“Still, I can’t believe Lord Ferdinand is getting married...” Damuel groaned while I was stirring the pot. “When will it be my turn?” He didn’t seem to be taking it very well that even the forever bachelor Ferdinand was soon to have a wife.

“Well, I assume you’ll find someone as soon as a laynoble girl using my compression method reaches a capacity similar to yours, no? And given that learning the method requires them to be in our faction, there shouldn’t be any problems on that front. Plus, I’m sure Mother will introduce you to someone with enough mana and status. If she does, bear in mind that you won’t be able to refuse, but I assume you don’t mind at this point.”

“Yes, as I’ve given up on making it happen on my own...”

Damuel slumped his shoulders while handing me one necessary ingredient after another. I wanted to help him somehow, but this was out of my hands. Philine was the only person within my sphere of influence.

“Could you not get engaged to Philine? You’re both my retainers, and she’s working hard to compress her mana, right? You’re both laynobles, even, so there won’t be any problems there either.”

Damuel shook his head with a troubled frown. “Please don’t drag her into this for my sake. Don’t tell her I said this, but... I’m pretty sure she has a crush on Roderick.”

“What?! Really?!” I exclaimed.

“He once gave her a secret note, and they have grown much closer since he became a retainer. She even came to me the other day for advice, saying that the person she’s fallen for hasn’t been noticing her advances whatsoever. I’m guessing that person is Roderick.”

Philine went to Damuel for romantic advice? Very bad move...

Of course, I made sure to keep such a rude thought to myself.

“Philine has never come to me for romantic advice, so I never realized she has feelings for Roderick... Perhaps I should avoid suggesting her as your marriage partner, then,” I said, adding the last sprinkle of dust to the pot. The contents flashed, and with that, the ink was done.

I came out of the workshop with the finished ink in hand and informed Ferdinand that we were ready. In response, he spread out his Ehrenfest cape on the table and speedily began drawing magic circles.

He was making them large enough that precision wouldn't be much of an issue, but wow, his hand was moving at such phenomenal speed and without hesitation.

"Hm... There is not much time before the Starbinding Ceremony concludes. This should do," he said, giving a satisfied nod as he set down the pen. He was going to be given a new Ahrensbach cape after the ceremony, which would have on it magic circles embroidered by his bride during their engagement period. I was genuinely worried about whether Detlinde's work would meet Ferdinand's extremely high standards—though at the same time, I was relieved not to be in her shoes.

Thank goodness I'm not the one marrying him.

It was one thing to draw with ink, but I didn't want anything to do with embroidering such complex circles.

"You should return your other cape now that you have a new one," I said to Ferdinand. It clearly meant a lot to Heisshitze, who had gambled the valuable ingredients we had ended up using in my jureve for a chance to reclaim it. Ferdinand wasn't going to have any use for it, so it seemed only natural that he should give it back.

"I cannot bring anything important with me to Ahrensbach while I am still so unaware of the circumstances there. It would be best for you to either return it to Heisshitze through a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate at the Royal Academy or hold on to it until the Interduchy Tournament so that I can deliver it myself."

"Understood," I replied. "I'm going to hold on to it, then. I'm sure he would rather you give it back personally."

"So be it."

Ferdinand got Justus to help him remove his cape, then cleansed it with waschen before folding it and handing it to Philine.

"Philine," I said, "please inform Rihyarda that I would like the cape added to my luggage for when I return to the Royal Academy."

"As you wish."

Ferdinand was busy until the day he needed to leave. I spent that time in the castle, but long stretches passed without us seeing each other.

I took extra care to ensure that I wouldn't be ill on the day of his departure. In the meantime, I was working through the orphanage's budget, making charms to give to Eckhart and Justus, and preparing for my return to the Royal Academy. I also met with Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior in Florencia's office, where we discussed the children of the former Veronica faction.

Separation

“So today’s the day, huh...” Wilfried said. “How do you feel, Rozemyne?”

“Fine. I wouldn’t have let a little poor health stop me anyway—not when I’ve got the important duty of carrying Ferdinand’s luggage,” I replied. We were going to be seeing him off alongside our retainers, the archducal couple, and the Knight’s Order. Charlotte and Melchior were staying at home with Bonifatius.

Two wagons carrying luggage had arrived from Ferdinand’s estate. He had also brought gifts chosen by Elvira and Rihyarda from the castle’s storage room.

“You may begin moving everything into my highbeast,” I said, prompting the servants to begin putting what was about three wagons’ worth of luggage into my enlarged Pandabus. Those from Ahrensbach had already been told how much Ferdinand was bringing with him and were due to welcome us with three or more wagons of their own.

I gave Eckhart and Justus the charms that I had put my all into making. “You two are going to be in a dangerous position protecting Ferdinand, so please keep these with you,” I said.

“I am honored, milady,” Justus replied.

“Eckhart, protect Ferdinand no matter what happens.”

“You have my word.”

It seemed that not even their promises could rid me of my worries, but Angelica gave me a comforting pat on the back. “Don’t worry, Lady Rozemyne. Lord Eckhart is very strong. He will protect Lord Ferdinand no matter what,” she declared, her blue eyes betraying her unwavering faith. “I believe in his strength and loyalty.”

Eckhart returned a soft smile. “I know your passion for growing stronger and your loyalty to Lady Rozemyne are the real thing too. Protect her, no matter what. Lord Ferdinand will be beside himself should anything happen to her.”

“Understood!”

Angelica extended a clenched fist, which Eckhart then bumped with his own. It was a gesture that soldiers used to wish each other fortune in battle. I desperately wanted to join in, so I balled up a fist and reached out to them.

“Me too, Eckhart!” I exclaimed. “I’m going to work hard in Ehrenfest too!”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I’d really appreciate it if you could send Lord Ferdinand some more food every now and again.”

Despite my outstretched fist, Eckhart mussed my hair and nothing more. It wasn’t fair; I wanted to share in their battle ritual too.

“What are you even doing?” Ferdinand asked.

“Ferdinand... Eckhart and Angelica are praying for each other’s success in battle, but they won’t include me...” I sobbed, bemoaning the fist bump they had denied me.

Eckhart frowned. “But you’re not serving a lord or lady whom you need to protect. The ritual you’re talking about is done between knights who’ve put their pride on the line; it’s not something for an archduke candidate to be doing.”

Apparently, the gesture wasn’t the same among knights as it was among soldiers. Still, the rejection stung all the same. I pursed my lips, which made Ferdinand pull an exasperated face.

“Let us make a vow instead.”

“A vow...?” I repeated, feeling my body tense up at once. He was probably intending to make some impossible demand of me.

Ferdinand crouched down and gazed into my eyes. I was taken aback by the sudden movement, but he paid this no mind as he said, “I am going to Ahrensbach, wherefrom I shall protect Ehrenfest. Therefore, Rozemyne... I want you to stay here—to defend our duchy as its saint. Promise me you will not fall for the honeyed words of the Sovereignty or the other duchies should they come for you. Promise me that your attention will not stray—that you will do everything in your power to protect Ehrenfest.”

I swallowed at the surprising intensity of his words. Everyone was watching us in complete silence, and the weight of their gazes was pressing down on me. Ferdinand merely offered a slight smile in response, not seeming to care about the oppressive atmosphere.

“That said,” he continued, “I am aware that no verbal promise will stop you from leaping into a trap the moment books or libraries are used as bait. Instead, one must act thoughtfully. I can already imagine you forgetting everything as you scramble for your prize.”

Once again, he had such a precise read on me. I could only respond with a quiet grunt.

Ferdinand lowered his light-golden eyes, then sighed and removed a key from one of the pouches on his waist. It was metal with a yellow feystone. “I intend to bind you to Ehrenfest with this,” he said as he dangled it right in front of me.

“A key?” I asked, following it with my eyes. I didn’t know what it was for, but based on his small speech, I could guess that it led to something that would stop me from being baited.

Ferdinand took my hand and pressed the key to my palm, urging

me to take it. It was heavier than I had expected.

"This is the key to my estate," he explained. "My workshop, ingredients, books, documents, and magic tools, as well as my estate and all those who work there... I entrust all that I am leaving behind to you."

My eyes widened in shock, but again, Ferdinand didn't so much as falter. He continued speaking in a quiet, deep voice, his serious eyes never once leaving mine. Each word seemed to reach my ears and penetrate my mind, lingering in my thoughts.

"You told me once, a long time ago, that you wanted a library in return for your mana. Do you remember that?"

"I do," I replied. "It was when you wanted to research feyplants."

At the time, we had discussed the fact that it would be more than ten years before Ehrenfest would have mana in excess. Ferdinand had said that he wanted to use my mana for experiments, since he thought that it could be used to grow unique materials. And as I recalled, I had demanded a library for the trouble.

"Indeed," Ferdinand said. "I will give you my estate to serve as a library—and in return, I want you to use the mana that you would have given me to instead protect Ehrenfest. This duchy is my Geduldh. I wish for you to ensure its safety."

Ferdinand rested one of his large hands on my hand that was holding the key and said, "*Andern*." No sooner had the word passed his lips than my mana was sucked into the key, registering me as its new owner. He then slowly pulled away, and a sudden chill ran through me. The very thought of carrying on without him there to protect me shook me to my core.

"I imagine you will not fall victim to the enticing words of others if you have your own library to protect, no?" Ferdinand said as he stood up. There was a smirk on his lips but a certain intensity to his eyes as he watched me.

As always, I found it frustrating that even those closest to me had so little faith in my self-control. I had my family in the lower city; Lutz and Benno; Fran, Gil, and the others in the temple; and everyone from the plant paper and printing workshops. I even considered it my duty as an archduke candidate to protect Ehrenfest.

"I would safeguard this duchy even if you hadn't given me anything in return," I said.

"Rozemyne, I wish for you to act without fail—half measures will not be enough. Consider this a forward payment to that end. Or, what, do you intend to say that the library in my estate is not enough for you? If you would rather not have it, then I will simply take it back."

"That's obviously not what I'm trying to say! I'd never give up so many books!" I exclaimed, clutching the key to my chest. I was on the

verge of crying and pleading with him not to leave. I could only imagine how relieving it would be to shout, "I don't care about some king's decree!"

Unfortunately, such displays of emotion weren't appropriate for the kind of archducal daughter that Ferdinand wanted me to be. I fought back the tears to some success, but even then, I couldn't stop the feelings that were swirling around inside of me. I was angry about the unreasonable decree, frustrated about once again not being trusted, overjoyed that Ferdinand had remembered that tiny promise we had made so long ago, sad that he was leaving us, and excited to be getting my own library. All these conflicting feelings made my mana surge through my body, threatening to overflow at any moment.

If crying in front of people isn't allowed, then I'll just have to turn the tears into mana instead.

"Lady Rozemyne?!"

"Your eyes are turning into rainbows!"

My retainers let out panicked cries, while Ferdinand extended a hand to me and said, "Rozemyne, contain yourself."

"No."

I formed my schtappe and chanted, "*Stylo*," turning it into a pen. Then I used my overflowing mana to draw a glowing magic circle in the air.

"Rozemyne, what are you doing?"

"Expressing my thanks for the library," I replied, then returned my focus to the circle. "May Ferdinand be blessed as he leaves Ehrenfest."

This wasn't like the prayer I had given when unleashing all of my feelings for my family.

Now that I was the High Bishop, I was able to give proper blessings.

My time at the Royal Academy meant that I now had a schtappe to control my mana.

I had learned about magic circles.

My mentor had provided me with everything... and in return, I would give him the most powerful blessing that one person could give another.

"What is this?" Ferdinand asked. "A magic circle of all elements?"

"It's a magic circle from the last page of the bible," I replied with a grin. "One that only High Bishops get to see."

This wasn't the kind of complicated, bizarre magic circle taught in the Royal Academy for people to use for their own benefit, nor was it the magic circle that appeared on the first page for those trying to become king. This particular circle existed only so that those who had become High Bishops could pray to all of the gods at once, praying

just for the sake of praying. It couldn't be used for oneself—only for another.

And so, I drew the magic circle as I remembered it.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies...”

As I started to intone the prayer, the magic circle dazzled with golden light, and a dark ring appeared around the outer rim. I could hear those around me stirring in surprise, but I ignored them and continued to speak.

“O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe...”

Mana flowed out of my schtappe with each divine name, and the sigil representing each god started to shine its respective color as they were called.

“Please hear my prayer and graciously lend your blessings. I offer you my power and devote to you my service and gratitude. May your divine protection be granted to those departing—the power of Water that washes away corruption, of Fire that cannot be extinguished, of Wind that wards against danger, of Earth that embraces all, and of Life that never relents. May they have them one and all.”

The magic circle began to float up, with the light of the blessings falling upon Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus. The divine colors were all mixing together to form a rainbow, and Ferdinand stared up at the magic circle in a daze as they rained down upon him.

I puffed out my chest as best I could and smiled at him. “I’m growing too, you know. I’m not going to stay the same person forever.”

Hopefully this would repay him for all that he had done for me.

Hopefully he would acknowledge that I really had grown.

Hopefully he would go to Ahrensbach feeling a little more safe.

Even if only a little.

As I watched Ferdinand closely, he looked down at me and gave a slight smile, his eyes closed. “I entrust Ehrenfest to you,” he said.

“Protect it in my place.”

“I will.”

We made our way to the border gate. The escorts from Ahrensbach had already arrived, and we said the usual greetings while they were given the luggage. Ferdinand exchanged farewells with Sylvester, then flourished his Ehrenfest cape and started toward the other side of the gate.

It had been bitterly cold on the day that Ferdinand entrusted our duchy to me. I had seen him off with the best smile that I could muster... and I praised my strength for having held back my tears until I reached my hidden room.

Epilogue

“Welcome, Aub Ehrenfest, Lord Ferdinand,” said one of the gate guards, looking relieved to see the arrival of the Ehrenfest party. “The Ahrensbach archduke candidate has already arrived and is waiting inside.”

Karstedt and several guards entered the border gate first, then Sylvester and Florencia followed with their retainers. Ferdinand similarly entered with his guard knight Eckhart, leaving behind Justus, who would instead be directing the luggage exchange.

Ferdinand glanced over his shoulder and saw Rozemyne leaning out the window of her highbeast. “Justus, where should I put my highbeast to make the moving easiest?” she asked.

“Right here would be ideal, milady.”

Rozemyne, you fool. Do not speak in such a loud voice. Those visiting from Ahrensbach will think of you as discourteous.

Despite his misgivings, Ferdinand could only sigh; he was too much the center of attention to chastise her. The saintly demeanor she had adopted while giving him a blessing of all the elements before his departure had vanished entirely. Perhaps the melancholic beauty he had witnessed had been but a figment of his imagination, he thought—a consequence of the sentimentality he was feeling now that he was leaving Ehrenfest. It certainly had not been due to anything of Rozemyne’s doing.

Though I would still like to research that beautiful magic circle. Never before have I seen such a thing...

She had used a magic circle that was neither wasteful nor inefficient despite using all of the elements at once—an enchanting sight, to say the least. Ferdinand started drawing the circle in the air with a finger, having burned its every detail into his mind... but then shook his head to disperse the thought. He would not have the time or leeway to research such things where he was going. Henceforth, he would be overseeing Detlinde and Letizia while facing Aub Ahrensbach and Georgine.

The Ehrenfest party started toward the room to which they were directed, and a young voice greeted them upon their arrival: “I am honored to have been graced with this opportunity to meet you.”

“You are their representative, Lady Letizia?” Sylvester asked.

The plan had initially been for Georgine to come, but she had

taken ill, so Letizia had been chosen as an urgent replacement. Aub Ahrensbach was, of course, still unwell, and Detlinde was absorbed in studying for her upcoming archducal duties.

"I am not yet attending the Royal Academy, but I will strive to fulfill my duties as a representative of Aub Ahrensbach," Letizia said, facing Sylvester and offering a proper greeting despite her youth.

Ferdinand tapped a finger against his temple. It was almost certainly the truth that Aub Ahrensbach was unwell and that Detlinde was frantically preparing for the countless duties she would need to accept while succeeding certain aspects of the archduke's position. He was more curious about Georgine's absence; the suggestion that she was ill seemed very dubious indeed.

I would much like to know what she is planning..

Ferdinand was confident that everything related to the bible incident could be traced back to Georgine. Perhaps there was still more to come.

"Wagons have been prepared as per your request, Aub Ehrenfest," Letizia said. "We may begin moving the luggage at once. Now, where might Ehrenfest's wagons be?"

"We did not bring any," Sylvester replied. "We transported our luggage via highbeast."

Letizia looked confused, so the Ehrenfest party took her outside. Rozemyne had already placed her highbeast in the most convenient location for transferring luggage and was now in the process of opening a door on its rear.

"Um, Aub Ehrenfest... is that truly a highbeast?" Letizia asked.

"It is. Are drivable highbeasts not yet found in Ahrensbach?"

"I am aware of their existence, and a number of younger students in the Royal Academy use them... but this is my first time seeing one so large."

"I expect that Lady Rozemyne is still the only person who can change the size of her highbeast at will," Sylvester said with a restrained smile.

Letizia was visibly fascinated; it seemed that, unlike Detlinde, she was actually capable of listening to others. This realization put Ferdinand more at ease, since he had been entrusted with educating her.

After listening to Sylvester, Letizia turned to her knights and those guarding the border gate and said, "Please assist Lord Ferdinand with his luggage."

Those from Ehrenfest were so used to Rozemyne's highbeast that they barely reacted to its presence, but those from Ahrensbach were completely taken aback. Ferdinand almost found the situation comical as he watched them start moving his luggage, all the while remaining

on guard against what appeared to them to be a fat grun.

Rozemyne was helping Justus to direct those moving the luggage, but the climate was cold enough that snow had started to fall. It was only light, but Rozemyne would most likely collapse unless she went inside soon—Ferdinand could tell using his intuition as her doctor.

“I shall oversee my luggage in Rozemyne’s place,” he said to a nearby knight. “Instruct her to enter the border gate.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Rozemyne received the message, then turned to look at Ferdinand. They looked each other in the eye for a moment before she slowly made her way over and said, “Should you not be using this time to associate with Ahrensbach? I am more than capable of dealing with your luggage.”

“Have you not noticed the snow? In this weather, even those who are healthy are at risk. I see no reason for you to chance it. Go inside already.”

“But this is a rare opportunity for me to be helpful,” Rozemyne protested, disregarding the fact that Ferdinand was trying to be considerate.

Ferdinand reached out and pinched Rozemyne’s cheek. It was much softer than expected, and quite pleasant to the touch. He squeezed harder, practically massaging her face. It was her fault for having such pinchable cheeks.

“That hurtsh!”

“If you do not go inside, then Wilfried cannot either, for you are of the same status. Leonore, Angelica, take her inside already. Brunhilde, Lieseleta, prepare some hot tea to warm their bodies. Men, assist with the luggage.”

Ferdinand glanced toward his luggage, ignoring Rozemyne as she pouted and massaged her cheeks. The pile had decreased steadily during the course of their pointless conversation, like the sand in an hourglass indicating that his time in Ehrenfest was running out.

“Ferdinand...” Sylvester said, then gritted his teeth and stared down at the floor. Ferdinand understood exactly what that small sequence meant and cast his eyes down as well; it was how Sylvester acted whenever he was trying to squash down the feelings rising in his chest. “As stated previously, once you leave the duchy for this engagement, you will start being treated as an Ahrensbach citizen. Just as Georgine was.”

There are tears in your eyes, Sylvester. What kind of an aub cannot keep his feelings hidden?

Or so Ferdinand wanted to say, but he could not get the words out for some reason. He felt a burning pain in his throat, and the most he could do was swallow.

Sylvester's eyes suddenly turned fierce as he continued, "Ferdinand, on that night, I said all that I wanted to say. I don't know if you remember, but it's still true."

Ferdinand thought back to the night in question, when he had shared drinks with Sylvester and Karstedt for the very last time...

"I've put up with him for long enough," Karstedt announced to Ferdinand, looking completely exhausted. "I think it's time for the source of our problems to have a talk with him."

Karstedt wasted no time in bringing Ferdinand to Sylvester's personal chambers. It seemed that Sylvester had started drinking already—and with very little restraint, as he was waiting in a drunken stupor.

"There you are, Ferdinand. Come! Drink!" Sylvester exclaimed, thrusting a wine-filled cup toward him with such force that the liquid spilled out onto his fingers.

"I do not have long to prepare before I must leave," Ferdinand replied with a grimace. He thought Sylvester a troublesome drunk and wanted nothing more than to escape having to deal with him... but Sylvester was having none of it.

"You have time to make a ridiculous charm for Rozemyne but not to drink with me?"

Ferdinand reluctantly accepted the wine, determining that he had no other choice. He had some business with Sylvester, at least; he recalled a request that he wished to make regarding Rozemyne.

"You know what?" Sylvester slurred. "You, Ferdinand... are *cruel*."

"I must say, that took you far too long to notice."

"I've never liked that part of you," Sylvester continued, unfazed. "I wanted to be an older brother you could rely on." He sounded eerily similar to Rozemyne trying to support Charlotte—and when Ferdinand realized this, he could not help but chuckle.

"Ah, but I *am* relying on you."

"Don't say stuff you don't mean!"

"I see the drink has yet to dull *all* your senses. I am not being entirely dishonest, though," Ferdinand replied, slowly bringing his own cup to his lips. The aroma of wood from a ripe barrel reached his nose, then became even more fragrant with his first mouthful. At the same time, a dense, somewhat bitter grape flavor spread through his mouth and down his throat.

Sylvester watched with a proud grin as Ferdinand took another sip. "Whaddaya think? Pretty good, huh?"

"Indeed. This is my preferred flavor. I imagine it was quite difficult to obtain."

Sylvester chuckled to himself, evidently pleased with that answer,

and similarly drank from his cup. Meanwhile, Karstedt picked up his own cup with a wry smile, seeming more at ease now that Sylvester had calmed down.

“Once I am gone, the duty of protecting Rozemyne will fall to you both,” Ferdinand said, leisurely continuing to drink. “I have given her all the charms I can, and I intend to bind her to Ehrenfest by giving her my estate to use as a library. But even now, I cannot lower my guard with Wilfried as her fiancé.”

Sylvester’s eyes widened. “You’re giving the estate Father gave you to Rozemyne? I was planning to oversee it myself.”

“I have no children, and she is my charge. Is it not proper that it should go to her?”

“It is, but... I never thought you’d give it to *anyone*.”

Karstedt seemed equally as stunned.

Ferdinand exhaled, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. “I, too, struggled with the idea of giving up the estate that Father gifted me. However, Rozemyne will need some tangible attachment to Ehrenfest if she is to resist the Sovereignty’s temptations. Her engagement to Wilfried will not be anywhere near enough.”

Ferdinand was well aware that Rozemyne was more worried about him than any other noble, so, despite having had a considerable amount of time to think of ways to keep her chained to noble society, his efforts thus far had proven largely unsuccessful.

“We know her absurd origins and that she cannot be expected to behave as a standard noble,” Ferdinand continued. “Thus, as someone whom Rozemyne considers ‘family,’ I had no choice but to become those chains myself. It was to this end that I adopted the familial role that she desires of me.”

“Is that why you gave her that hairpin?” Karstedt asked with a sigh, seeming exasperated for some reason. “It’s become quite fashionable to give a hair ornament to one’s escort partner during the graduation ceremony. If she looked her age, it might have come across as a proposal.”

“But she does not, and, at least for now, I remain her guardian. I did not give her a necklace, so there is nothing to fret about. It would have been ideal for Wilfried to make the charm as her fiancé, but I did not have the time to teach him the brewing or the magic circles required—nor does he have the necessary mana or ingredients.”

“That’s too much!” Sylvester cried despite himself.

“Which is why I did not demand that Wilfried make it. I also thought it unreasonable to ask either of you, since you are both so busy with our winter plans. If at some point my gift comes to be seen as a proposal feystone, then Wilfried can simply replace it when he matures. And once he and Rozemyne have graduated and gotten

married, and we no longer need to worry about interference from the Sovereignty, Rozemyne can remove the charm entirely.”

Ferdinand waved away any further complaints, frustrated. As far as he was concerned, he had made the optimal decisions for protecting Rozemyne.

“It’s my fault that you couldn’t resist all that pressure from the king and Ahrensbach...” Sylvester said, beginning his grumblings once again. He went on to scold Ferdinand for being so heartless as to decide on the matter alone, bemoaned the limitations placed on him as the archduke, and then muttered about being an unreliable brother. “I don’t want you to leave, so... don’t.”

All in all, Sylvester was being embarrassingly emotional. Ferdinand struggled to recall just how many times he had needed to endure this cycle over the past half year—and the realization that he was having to endure it again was tiring beyond words.

“Again with you, and again with Rozemyne... You are all so troublesome to deal with.”

“Maybe you should just accept that people care about you,” Karstedt interjected. “In fact, though you might not realize it, I think you already have. There’s a very obvious smile on that sourpuss face of yours.”

Ferdinand attempted to grimace in response, but the truth was that everyone needing him so much did make him feel strangely warm inside. He wasn’t particularly pleased about it, but perhaps Rozemyne was correct in saying that he struggled to notice others showing him affection.

“Ehrenfest is your Geduld, Ferdinand. And don’t you forget it!” Sylvester declared. “As your older brother, I refuse to accept anything else!”

Ferdinand did not offer a response. There was no need, as Sylvester had already fallen asleep.

“I remember...” Ferdinand said.

And not just that night. He remembered Sylvester accepting him as his little brother on the first day they met, right after his father had brought him home. He remembered him playing the part of a big brother, dragging Ferdinand around everywhere and trying to protect him from the sharp-eyed Veronica even when the battle was unwinnable.

Beyond that, Sylvester had agreed to adopt a commoner for the good of the duchy. He had also defied the aub of a top-ranking duchy during the Archduke Conference in an attempt to keep his younger brother from being moved to Ahrensbach. He would have openly defied the king himself had Ferdinand not intervened.

Now that their father, the previous archduke, was gone, Sylvester was the only person Ferdinand could call family. And yet, the moment Ferdinand departed for his new home, Sylvester would need to start treating him as a noble from Ahrensbach and nothing more. Their usual pastimes were soon to be a thing of the past. No longer would Sylvester be able to clear his room and summon Ferdinand to come by highbeast. No longer would they be able to discuss plans, or have a few drinks and share in some meaningless conversation.

Why am I feeling this sense of loss now? Has this not been clear from the very beginning? Something must be wrong with me...

Ferdinand put on a cynical smile, but Sylvester remained the picture of seriousness. In response, Ferdinand sighed, allowing his expression to stiffen as well.

“Focus not on Ehrenfest, but on finding happiness in Ahrensbach,” Sylvester said. “That’s the only thing I ask of you.”

It had been countless years since Ferdinand last thought about his own happiness, yet both Sylvester and Rozemyne brought it up incessantly.

How foolish. Ehrenfest is clearly more important than that.

Ferdinand was used to dismissing their fanciful ideas, but on this particular occasion, he found that he was unable to give his usual response. He remained silent for some time, then finally said, “I will not forget those words, Brother.”

Having said farewell to Sylvester, Ferdinand made his way into the border gate, where he found Rozemyne speaking with Letizia. They were about the same height, despite the latter having not yet entered the Royal Academy.

Or is Rozemyne ever so slightly taller?

Rozemyne had appeared to be the shorter of the two during Lamprecht’s Starbind Ceremony. That she was now a similar height to Letizia proved that she had finally started to grow.

Ferdinand noticed a familiar-looking hairpin adorning Letizia’s golden tresses. It was the one that Rozemyne had prepared, arguing that Ferdinand should give the young Ahrensbach girl a gift.

But why would you give it to her yourself...?

Ferdinand sighed; as always, it was hard to tell whether Rozemyne was being considerate or the complete opposite. As he got closer, he realized that the retainers around the two girls were desperately trying to keep themselves from laughing. A sudden change came over Wilfried when he saw Ferdinand, and he desperately tried to alert Rozemyne, but Ferdinand stopped him and stood behind Rozemyne to listen to her conversation.

“—right. Ferdinand’s kindness is very indirect and just as hard to understand. He is extremely harsh as a teacher, but that is because he

is so passionate about seeing his students grow. That said, if you find that he is being *too* extreme, please contact me at once. I will send word for him to reflect on his actions and improve.”

“Rozemyne, what in the world are you saying?”

“Eep!”

The moment Ferdinand spoke, Rozemyne jumped into the air and almost out of her skin. “I was just offering a few warnings so that you aren’t misunderstood,” she said with a quivering smile, attempting to justify herself. “I have said nothing insulting. Isn’t that right, Lady Letizia?”

“Um... Y-Yes, that’s right,” Letizia replied—though it was clear from the look on her face that she did not want to join the fray. Meanwhile, Rozemyne was wearing the same guilty expression that she always wore when caught doing something very unnecessary.

Everyone can tell you are forcing that smile, fool.

Ferdinand had an urge to pinch Rozemyne’s cheeks and pressure her into revealing what she had actually said, as he normally would in such a situation, but there were too many Ahrensbach eyes watching them.

“Lady Letizia, you would do well to not take Rozemyne’s words seriously,” Ferdinand said. “And as for you, Rozemyne... it seems my luggage has all been moved.”

In an instant, Rozemyne reached out and grabbed his sleeve. He could see the same hopeless worry in her golden eyes that he had seen in Sylvester’s.

“I will send letters through Raimund...” Ferdinand said, detaching Rozemyne’s hand from his clothes. “And fear not—I will keep my promise. You, too, should continue to be careful.”

Rozemyne nodded and took a step back, toward Wilfried. He was similar to his father in many ways, and while he was bound to get exasperated or play around with Rozemyne at times, Ferdinand could count on him to protect her.

“Wilfried, I leave the rest to you.”

“Yes, Uncle. Be safe.”

Content that there was nothing more to be said, Ferdinand passed through the border gate without looking back and climbed into an Ahrensbach carriage. Eckhart was seated to his side, while Letizia and a guard took the seats opposite them.

As the carriage began to advance at a leisurely speed, Ferdinand turned his attention out the window. Soon enough, a flock of highbeasts took to the sky on the Ehrenfest side of the gate. Even from a distance, Ferdinand could recognize Rozemyne’s Pandabus; and the fact that he was not with her and the others made him feel exceedingly strange.

“Um, Lord Ferdinand... what manner of person is Lady Rozemyne?” came Letizia’s timid voice. She had seemingly been racking her brain for something to talk about, and this was all that had come to mind. It was possible that she was not on good terms with Detlinde; Ferdinand made sure to remember that as he returned his attention to the inside of the carriage.

“How did she appear to you? You first met during the Starbinding Ceremony held at the border gate, but this was your first time speaking to her, no?”

“She is the Saint of Ehrenfest and a highly skilled archduke candidate who has come first-in-class two years in a row at the Royal Academy. I am told that you educated her, Lord Ferdinand. I thought she was quite beautiful when she was performing the Starbinding Ceremony as the High Bishop, but as we spoke today, I realized that she is much kinder and more sociable than I expected. It was also clear just how worried she is about you.”

Being the fool that she was, Rozemyne had given Letizia a veritable list of warnings and instructions, despite them never having spoken before. And as if she hadn’t been transparent enough, she had outright asked Letizia to “look after Ferdinand for me” on more than one occasion.

“Not to mention... Lady Rozemyne said this hairpin was a gift from you, but she prepared it herself, didn’t she?” Letizia asked, her smile reaching her blue eyes as she touched the ornament in question. Its flowers were the divine color of winter so that they could be used during the upcoming socializing season, and they stood out nicely against her golden hair.

Rozemyne does have a tendency to say things that are best left unsaid and do things that are entirely unnecessary.

Ferdinand felt what he could only describe as a mixture of embarrassment and awkwardness. He was overcome with the urge to deny Letizia’s words, but she seemed so much more at ease while talking about Rozemyne.

“I am her guardian and essentially family to her,” Ferdinand eventually replied, “so while I understand that she is worried for my sake, her excessive concern has started to become somewhat troublesome.”

Letizia giggled as she remembered Rozemyne’s many warnings, but her smile was soon tinged with sadness. “Like family? I am... a little jealous,” she mumbled.

Ferdinand recalled that Letizia was barely connected to her family. Both her parents were from Drewanchel, but she had been relocated to Ahrensbach at a young age after being adopted by her grandfather. Her grandmother-turned-adoptive mother had passed

away, and now her adoptive father was on the verge of ascending to the distant heights as well. Her only remaining family were Georgine; Detlinde, her soon-to-be adoptive mother; and now Ferdinand, her soon-to-be adoptive father. It was easy to see why she and the others were so unsettled.

“I understand that you are in a very unfortunate situation, Lady Letizia. You may not be able to trust me, but perhaps you can trust a royal decree. I will educate you and make you a proper aub once you come of age; such is the duty given to me by the king and Aub Ahrensbach.”

This proclamation elicited confused stares from both Letizia and the guard knight beside her. “Your duty...?” Letizia asked. “But what will you do if Lady Detlinde decides that she doesn’t want to give up being the aub?”

“We would need only speak to the king. An aub who defies a royal decree is destined to be eliminated by the Sovereignty.”

Had going against the king’s orders been so simple, then Ferdinand would not have been in his current predicament. No matter how reluctant Detlinde might be to surrender the archducal seat, there was little she could do with a royal decree hanging over her head.

“You appear to be pulling a face,” Ferdinand said.

“I am just a little surprised. Lady Detlinde described you as the kind of man who strives to do everything in his power to grant his wife’s desires.”

Ferdinand put on his public-facing smile. He certainly had given off that impression—and it wasn’t necessarily untrue, considering the room for interpretation that “strives” and “in his power” provided. “If one were to weigh the desires of one’s wife against the king’s decree, it should be obvious which would come out on top.”

“I see...” Letizia replied. She cast her eyes out the window, looking toward Ehrenfest, and gave a smile tinged with relief. “I was eager to learn more about the man due to become my adoptive father, but my efforts saw limited success. Although I learned much about your grades in the Royal Academy, no one had anything to say about your personality. But if you truly do value the king’s orders and command enough respect that those who know you are so reluctant to see you go, then I am willing to trust Lady Rozemyne’s words.”

You would do well not to trust them too much.

Ferdinand swallowed the response he had wanted to give. Letizia was being friendly enough; there was no reason for him to ruin the mood unnecessarily. Earning her trust and the trust of those around her was crucial for him to live more comfortably in Ahrensbach, and as he began to wonder how he could achieve this, the suggestion that Rozemyne had given him suddenly came to mind.

No, wait... There was something else.

On an emotional level, Ferdinand dreaded the thought of actually carrying out Rozemyne's idea... but at the same time, he could not deny that it had made some sense. He had nothing to gain from wasting all this traveling time, and after they arrived, there was no knowing when they would next have a chance to converse.

And so, Ferdinand started telling Letizia about his planned schedule for her education. It was something that he would have needed to explain to her eventually anyway. He also arranged for them to share a meal when they arrived at their lodgings, where they could discuss the matter with Letizia's head attendant.

Ferdinand spent the remainder of the carriage ride trying to think of other ways to earn a person's trust, but his efforts bore no fruit. Though he had spent a lifetime trying to avoid conflict, he had never proactively attempted to make allies, so he was ultimately limited to Rozemyne's suggestions.

"Perhaps you could play the harspiel, as milady advised," Justus noted, holding back the urge to laugh while simultaneously electing not to put forward any alternatives. Eckhart nodded in agreement, saying that he looked forward to hearing Ferdinand play.

At this rate, I am going to end up playing the harspiel as she suggested...

After several days, Ferdinand arrived at the Ahrensbach Noble's Quarter, no closer to finding an alternative to Rozemyne's suggestion. Winter socializing was soon to begin, but the climate was so much warmer than in Ehrenfest that it still felt like the height of autumn.

"Welcome, Lord Ferdinand."

Upon his arrival at the castle, Ferdinand was greeted by his fiancée, Detlinde. He found it repulsive enough that she looked so similar to Veronica, but her stay in Ehrenfest had confirmed that she was also thoughtless and self-centered. Keeping her under control was essential to keeping Sylvester, his duchy, and its inhabitants safe... but there was also the matter of dealing with Georgine.

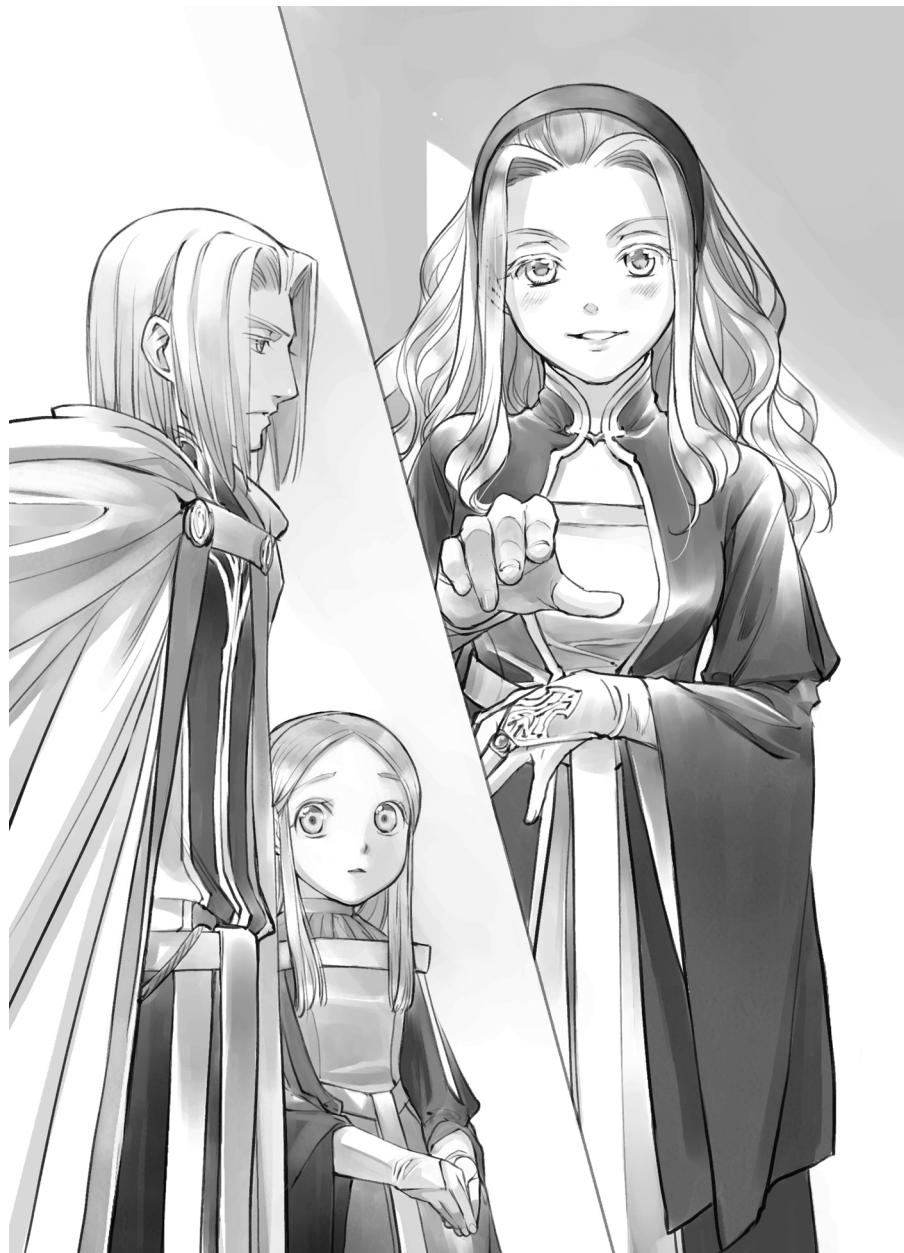
"I ask of you, brought to me by the Goddess of Time... protect Sylvester, and protect Ehrenfest."

All of a sudden, Ferdinand recalled the last words his father had said to him. He remembered the mana that had enveloped him vanishing when he had agreed, and the small mass that had returned to his hand. He remembered the infirm fingers that had held on to his own, and the golden eyes that had tried so desperately to focus on him.

"I will do as you ask and offer up my protection," Ferdinand declared. It was a promise to his late Father, but Detlinde smiled and

reached out a hand to him.

“I am glad to hear that you understand your place.”



The Beginning of a Winter Apart

Irreplaceable

My office was filled with the scratching of pens and the hushed murmurs of my retainers checking each other's work.

"Aub Ehrenfest, if you would sign this."

I accepted the document from the scholar, looked it over, and then sighed. Everything was business as usual, but without Ferdinand to help me, I was having to deal with more work than ever. It was suffocating, and it didn't help that my retainers all glared at me the instant I tried to rest. I was pretty much under watch at all times now.

"If you would check over this, Aub Ehrenfest..." said another scholar who had entered the room. He was holding out a petition from a giebe.

"Oh, give that to..."

I trailed off, remembering that Ferdinand was no longer here for me to depend on. He had departed several days ago, but my habit of trying to delegate work to him had yet to fade. It was a disappointing truth, and one that preyed on my mind as I started going through the documents myself. In the past, petitions from giebes and other, less important requests had all gone straight to Ferdinand.

Now, what to do?

Petitions from giebes often contained important requests that only the archduke could review, as well as some minor ones that I would only need to glance over. In this case, I simply needed to hand the matter over to the scholar in charge, but having to personally check each document was a waste of time. I needed someone who could manage all the minor requests themselves.

It had also been standard for Ferdinand to help me with my archducal work. I was fine with doing all that myself, since it was mine to begin with, but something had to be done about the archducal *family* work that he had previously been in charge of. His move to Ahrensbach had created a massive hole we had yet to fill.

I decided to send an ordonnanz to one of the scholars in my uncle's office. "Is Bonifatius there? I could use his help."

Bonifatius was old enough to have retired already, but even now,

he was assisting us with archducal family work. Moving forward, he would even be helping to educate the archduke candidates. I assumed that he just wanted an excuse to spend more time with his granddaughter Rozemyne, but Ehrenfest had so few adult archducal family members that his help was greatly appreciated.

“Lord Bonifatius is not here,” came the response from a bemused-sounding scholar. “He is at the training grounds. It seems that he intends to train the apprentice knights until Lady Rozemyne leaves for the Royal Academy.”

Bonifatius had received untold amounts of praise from Rozemyne for improving the apprentices’ coordination in time for last year’s ditter games, and now he was fixated on getting even more after the next Interduchy Tournament.

“Our plan was to leave the work to Lord Ferdinand while we attended the Interduchy Tournament this year, but that will no longer do,” the scholar continued. “At the very least, it will not be a fair trade unless Lady Rozemyne still gives her praise. Not to mention, there will not be anyone around to stop Lord Bonifatius’s brutal training sessions while the knight commander and the others are in meetings. Will you stop him, Aub Ehrenfest?”

I knew how much Bonifatius wanted to spend the Interduchy Tournament with Rozemyne, and the last thing I wanted to do was go to the training grounds while he was taking out his frustrations on the knights. I also recognized that the scholar had mentioned the knight commander and the others being “in meetings.” Bonifatius was no doubt distracting the knights to keep information about the purge hidden.

“He’ll refuse to do administrative work, and I don’t want him coming here to complain. Tell him to keep training the knights until he’s satisfied,” I replied, taking care not to sound unnaturally harsh. There were still too many people close to me who couldn’t find out about the purge. No amount of caution was excessive.

The purge had also been among Ferdinand’s countless duties in Ehrenfest, since he was distanced from the former Veronica faction and had therefore been best suited to keeping things hidden from them. Karstedt had since been put in charge, but he was having a heck of a hard time keeping things in order.

Now that Ferdinand was gone, there were gaps everywhere that we were struggling to fill. And every time I stumbled upon a new one, I realized just how far my half-brother’s influence had reached.

“If we cannot delegate to Lord Bonifatius, then what shall we do with this?” a scholar asked.

“I think I’ll give it to Wilfried,” I said, then sent an ordonnanz to my son, the future archduke. I noted that I wanted to entrust him with

a new job, and he happily came running.

“Sorry to have called you away from your studies,” I said.

“It’s fine, Father. I’ve finished studying for my written lessons, and anything to do with the printing industry can be given to Charlotte,” he replied, clearly excited. “My responsibilities as the next archduke are far more important.”

I had to fight back the urge to smile; he really was just like me. I remembered when my father had entrusted me with new work, and how much I had loved the feeling of at last being treated like an adult. I enjoyed receiving new things to do, but that was because the unknown was so stimulating and exciting. Once it became a regular part of my everyday life, I would swiftly lose interest.

Either way, it’s good that he’s motivated.

Wilfried got bored easily, so the plan was to give him something new to do whenever he started to lose interest in his current task. It was a bit early for him to be doing this kind of work, but I was hoping that entrusting him with the duties of an archduke would benefit his studies.

Plus you never know when death might come...

I had inherited the role of Aub Ehrenfest from my father much earlier than expected, and there hadn’t been a single archduke younger than me during my first Archduke Conference. The usual handover process hadn’t even been completed, so Bonifatius had needed to support me while teaching me my duties.

But what would happen if I died at the same age as Father?

Bonifatius was old enough that he could pass away any day now, and while the original plan had been for Ferdinand to take up a supportive role after my unexpected demise, that was no longer an option. Would it be possible for Florencia to pass all of our duties to Wilfried and Rozemyne on her own? She carried out her own duties as a first wife, but she wasn’t involved in archducal work, so there was a lot she would struggle with. Considering the long term, it definitely seemed wise to give Wilfried an overview of everything that would one day be expected of him.

“Father, what do you want me to do?”

“We’ve received petitions from giebés. Get the scholars here to provide responses,” I said, handing him the documents in question. His retainers were accompanying him, and they probably wouldn’t let him send any incorrect or mistaken answers.

After accepting the documents with a satisfied grin, Wilfried exited my office with his retainers.

Ferdinand never smiled like that when I gave him new jobs. He doesn’t have a cute bone in his body.

My half-brother, who was younger than me by five years, had always been shockingly good at hiding his emotions—even at a young age. I closed my eyes and thought back to the first time we had met...

Father had announced that I was soon going to have a little brother. Mother didn't seem too pleased about it, but my other siblings were all girls and older than me, so I was over the moon. My mind raced with thoughts of what I could do as an older brother, and in my excitement, I asked Karstedt and Rihyarda for their input.

"At this rate, he might not respect you at all," Rihyarda warned, so I started doing my best to be a good older brother. I resolved to be nothing like Georgine, who treated my sister and me so harshly, and to instead take good care of our new addition to the family.

"Sylvester, this is Ferdinand," Father said, introducing my new half-brother. "He's going to join you in the northern building—and one day, he'll become your pillar of support. Get along now."

The boy in front of me had light-blue hair cropped at the shoulders and almost feminine features. He was so pretty, in fact, that I might have mistaken him for a girl in different clothes.

Ferdinand gave the greeting he had been taught without so much as a smile. He was nervous, I thought, so I decided to start dragging him all over the place in an attempt to make him feel more at ease.

Of course, it wouldn't be until much later that I realized his stoic expression was a sign not of anxiety, but of cautiousness.

"'Lord Sylvester' is way too formal," I said. "We're siblings now, so just call me 'Brother.'"

"Grow your hair out," I insisted. "Then we'll match."

"I'll help you with your studies," I offered. "How about some harspiel practice?"

Slowly but surely, Ferdinand started to seem less tense... but Mother never stopped ignoring his existence entirely. I didn't understand why she refused to even try to spend time with him.

I wonder how long it was before I realized that she was trying to eliminate him—that she was doing all those terrible things to him without Father's and my knowing.

Rihyarda and Karstedt had saved Ferdinand on more than one occasion after the truth came to light. Father and I had likewise told Mother to stop, but that had only made her more stubborn and her abuse even crueler.

"Why do you do these things, Mother?!" I once exclaimed.

"That child is a threat to you," she replied. "He must be eliminated sooner rather than later. You are the only male archduke candidate we need, Sylvester."

She had refused to listen, so Father and I eventually decided to do everything in our power to keep her and Ferdinand apart.

The situation then changed when Ferdinand became a third-year. Even though he had already obtained such high grades, he had asked to stay at the Royal Academy outside of winter so that he could take the knight and scholar courses too. Mother had refused, as this would have required them to not only keep the dormitory open for his sake, but also ensure there were servants and retainers there to attend to him.

Mother continued to protest, but Father granted Ferdinand his wish nonetheless; his greatest priority was to keep the two away from each other. Thus, Ferdinand started spending the bulk of each year at the Royal Academy, returning to Ehrenfest only when Father determined that he should.

I started seeing him a lot less often after that, but the few times we did meet, he always seemed so full of life. I was just glad things were working out.

I had assumed that Ferdinand was safe in the Royal Academy, and that I only needed to keep an eye on Mother whenever he returned to Ehrenfest. It had never even crossed my mind that he might be suffering in the dormitory—and that even our duchy's dormitory supervisor might be treated poorly along with him.

Then, as my marriage to Florencia came nearer and nearer, I started focusing less and less on my brother's feud with Mother. And once I was married, my attention turned to keeping Mother from interfering with my new life.

Only the first few years of my marriage were spent in bliss. We had assumed that Father's poor health was due to a common illness that would soon pass, but as time marched on, he had only grown weaker. And as he became more unwell, more of his work was thrust upon me. My hands were full before I knew it.

I hadn't thought there was anything unusual about Ferdinand helping me with my workload on the few occasions he came home. He was coming first-in-class every year; being probed about marrying someone from Dunkelfelger, a greater duchy; and spending all his time immersed in magic research. As far as I was concerned, he was having a blast doing whatever he wanted.

Everything was turned on its head when Father died. Ferdinand's engagement fell through—although I hadn't known at the time—and Mother's obsession with eliminating him became almost psychotic. I was worried, but not necessarily for Ferdinand. He was talented enough to have consistently come first-in-class; he needed only to fight back and Mother would meet her end.

But I can't risk losing either of them...

I cared about Ferdinand, both because he was my brother and because I had promised Father that I would protect Ehrenfest alongside him, and it was for that reason that I suggested he should enter the temple. Cutting off my mother simply wasn't an option—in part because she was my family by blood, and in part because she was my strongest source of support now that Father was gone.

My mother had lost her own mother at a young age, as well as her older brother. She had also had a very strained relationship with her father, considering that he had cared far more about his Leisegang wife than he had about her. Mother had reviled the second wife of her father and half-siblings alike, choosing to maintain contact only with her younger brother, who had been sent to the temple. Most other nobles wouldn't have spared my uncle so much as a glance, but she had cared for him deeply—and for Wilfried and me as well.

In contrast, her loathing for Ferdinand, who did not share her blood, was abnormally strong.

Unfortunately, even after Ferdinand had entered the temple and stopped associating with noble society, Mother had continued to pursue him in a maddening frenzy. The chaos had come to a head when she had committed a crime that could not be excused, and now she was detained in the Ivory Tower while Ferdinand was back in noble society.

“Your expression is getting darker by the day, Sylvester,” Florencia said, sounding concerned as I climbed into bed. I sent my retainers away, and only then did I feel as though I could breathe easily.

Florencia gently stroked my forehead. “Do you not think Lord Ferdinand would be displeased to hear that you are still bemoaning his departure?” she asked, her indigo eyes tinged with worry as she tenderly ran her fingertips across my cheek. “He left to protect both you and Ehrenfest, no?”

To protect Ehrenfest, huh...?

My eyes started heating up. I really had thought that Ferdinand would stay by my side forever, thanks to his promise with Father. I'd tried giving him a place here by dragging him all over and relying on him for things.

But in the end, I couldn't do as well as Rozemyne.

I was glad that Rozemyne existed, and adopting her had been a genius move. It had been great knowing that Ferdinand had someone to care about in the temple, and it had been fascinating to see how extensively he had cared for her despite complaining about what a pain it was. But most of all, I was pleased that Rozemyne had managed to get through to Ferdinand using her commoner ways. She

had gotten him to reveal things that he had kept hidden even from me. If not for her, I wouldn't have known exactly what Mother had done, that Ferdinand had been struggling beneath his steely exterior, or that Wilfried had been in a truly dangerous spot.

That reminds me... Rozemyne's taking this just as hard as I am, apparently.

Rozemyne was especially worn down, according to a report from Rihyarda. The news hadn't come as much of a surprise; she had trusted Ferdinand more than anyone else in noble society, and he had protected her countless times and in countless ways. She was probably suffering even more than I was.

Rozemyne must be feeling empty inside too.

I was sure that, like me, she felt an important part of her was missing. I couldn't protect her, and I hadn't been able to protect my little brother Ferdinand. In fact, he had ended up protecting me. That was what I regretted more than anything.

"You're gone now, Ferdinand... and you've left us all feeling so hollow..." I muttered, trying to vent my misdirected anger.

Florencia pulled me into a tight hug and lovingly rubbed my back. "It is not over yet, dear. You must grow strong enough to contain Lady Georgine. Turn that frustration into mana to use. I will be here at your side."

"I'll do it tomorrow..." I said, taking comfort in her warmth and drifting off to sleep.

Starting Life in Ahrensbach

We were now in Ahrensbach, and winter socializing was around the corner. There was a problem, though: Aub Ahrensbach had died just before we arrived. The archduke had apparently been in a shockingly dangerous state when he had sent his letter to Ehrenfest, and his true intention had been to have Lord Ferdinand here to fill the void left by his passing.

Aub Ahrensbach's death meant that our original plan of using him to form connections with the duchy's nobles was no longer an option. We were fortunate beyond words that Lord Ferdinand had formed a bond with Lady Letizia and her retainers on the way here.

The unfortunate circumstances had meant that Lady Detlinde was much too busy to welcome Ferdinand upon his arrival at the border gate. Lady Georgine had been sent instead, given her relation to Ehrenfest, but her grief over losing her husband was apparently so great that she had fallen ill on the way. Lady Letizia had then been summoned as an urgent replacement representative and sent to catch up to the carriage on her retainer's horse.

Though anyone with a brain can tell that Lady Georgine's lying.

She had worked tirelessly toward becoming the next aub, trapping her enemies in various plots and sparing no effort to secure her position. If someone told me she was still obsessed with Ehrenfest, I would believe them in an instant. She was crazy vindictive.

I had loved gathering information ever since I was little. It was more or less a hobby of mine, and in my eyes, every piece of intel was of equal worth. Some valued certain tidbits more than others, though. One man's trash is another man's treasure, as they say—and it was with this in mind that I made sure to collect even the most insignificant details.

As it turned out, Lady Georgine hadn't agreed with my methods. "Your information is imprecise and entirely useless," she had once said to me. It had been at that very moment that I lost all interest in sharing my information with her—and also my will to serve her.

Lady Georgine and I were in the same grade, and she had my big sister and mother both serving as her retainers. In the playroom, she had approached me and said, "You *are* taking the scholar course, correct? As a man, you will not be able to serve me as an attendant."

Right. That's an option...

In the end, I had decided to take the attendant course; my mother and sister were already serving Lady Georgine, and it seemed unnecessary for me to join them. Lady Georgine hadn't taken this very well, though. "You are a traitor, Justus. I can no longer trust you," she had said, and from that point on, she had started treating me quite harshly.

I hadn't known at the time, but Lord Sylvester had been born not long before that, and my mother was going to be moved into his service instead. Lady Georgine viewed my decision to take the attendant course as a means to evade becoming her scholar and to serve her little brother instead.

To be honest, I didn't care what she thought. I didn't want to serve either of them. Lady Georgine put on the pleasant airs of a fine noblewoman, but she had a storm of very intense emotions raging inside her and would go to any length to destroy her enemies. Lord Sylvester, on the other hand, had spent three years plagued with sickness, then suddenly turned into a complete hooligan who sprinted all over the place. Neither person had any qualities that compelled me to serve them.

"Justus. Some tea, if you would."

"Understood, Lord Ferdinand."

Instead, the person whom I had chosen to serve—even at the cost of giving up my name—was Lord Ferdinand. He was a good lord who used my information well and gave me a fair amount of freedom.

Lord Ferdinand had been spurned by Lady Veronica, the previous first wife, to the point that she had tried to eliminate him on more than one occasion. Of course, Lord Ferdinand had evaded each attempt on his life. Ironically, despite how much she despised him, it seemed reasonable to say that she was the very reason for his genius; after all, she had pretty much forced him to develop extreme endurance, caution, and diligence.

"Sergius, may I be taken to the kitchen?" I asked.

Sergius was one of the Ahrensbach attendants assigned to Lord Ferdinand. I also needed to use this opportunity to teach him which tea and whatnot our lord preferred.

"It may take us some time to get there," he replied, "but once the Starbind Ceremony with Lady Detlinde is complete, we will be moved to the aub's living quarters in the main building. That should make things much easier."

Lord Ferdinand couldn't go to the aub's chambers in the main building until he was married, so he was staying in a guest room for the time being. That much was normal, so I saw no reason to complain.

The problem is... when will the Starbinding actually take place?

We could say with all certainty that the announcement of the late aub's death and the assignment of the next archduke would take place during the spring Archduke Conference, but we didn't yet know whether the Starbinding Ceremony could also be held then. Lady Detlinde needed to prioritize dyeing the foundational magic with her mana and making it entirely hers.

She won't be able to dye it while she's at the Royal Academy, though. And it's obvious that Lord Ferdinand's mana is stronger.

The foundational magic was still dyed with the late Aub Ahrensbach's mana. Children had similar mana to their parents, so manipulating it wouldn't pose a significant problem, but once a couple married, they would start mixing mana and dyeing themselves in each other's colors. This was problematic because of the likelihood that Lord Ferdinand's mana would repel the aub's, thereby making Lady Detlinde's task even more difficult. They would probably postpone the marriage until after the foundation had been dyed.

"This hallway is for servants, but it also serves as a shortcut to the kitchen," Sergius explained with a smile while leading the way. I memorized the path while listening to the conversations of the busily moving servants.

My main jobs this winter were to form connections with nobles and gather intelligence. Lord Ferdinand had specifically told me to learn anything I could about Lady Georgine. Aub Ahrensbach's passing meant that the archducal living space needed to be cleared for the next archduke, and Lady Georgine was apparently in the process of moving her quarters. The servants were all running around—which made this the perfect opportunity for an infiltration mission.

Of course, I would need to dedicate some time to my preparations first. I still needed to master the locals' accents, for one thing. Most nobles sounded pretty similar in how they spoke, since we all socialized together in the Royal Academy and during the Archduke Conference, but to mingle with the commoner servants, it was necessary to learn their way of speaking and the slang they used.

The commoners here in Ahrensbach seemed to speak a bit differently from those in Ehrenfest's lower city, so I had to relearn how to talk. There were a few habits that were common to both regions, but for the most part, I would need to learn as much as I could from listening to the servants around me.

Looks like the servants here have uniforms too. That sure is a pain...

I wouldn't be able to do any infiltrating without one.

Although she hadn't come to meet us at the border, Lady Georgine had been there when we arrived at the castle. "I did not expect you to come as well, Justus," she had said to me. "Is Gudrun not with you? I get so few chances to see her, and I miss her ever so much." It was a

warning that she knew about my female persona and would find me out the instant I attempted to cross-dress.

Working with Lady Georgine was something of a challenge, since she knew me from my days messing around in the Royal Academy.

“Incidentally, Lord Ferdinand... do you not need to practice the harspiel?” I asked while serving him tea.

His internal dialogue hadn’t escaped my notice—each time we had stopped at an inn en route to Ahrensbach’s castle, he had mumbled, “Surely there is another way...” It seemed that he had never actually come up with an alternative, though. He had asked me several times for ideas, but I hadn’t even attempted to think of any. As far as I was concerned, nothing could beat Lady Rozemyne’s harspiel suggestion.

Now that Aub Ahrensbach was dead, we needed a quick way to make allies—but Lord Ferdinand was all-around terrible at dealing with people. He could complete tasks given to him to perfection, but he looked at things too logically and tended to leave emotion by the wayside.

In contrast to his harsh character, his harspiel playing was incredibly soft, and people had been smitten with his singing voice ever since he was a student. They would play an essential role in our aim to open the hearts of the Ahrensbach nobles. Women were bound to look at him more positively afterward—if not find themselves completely enraptured.

Lady Rozemyne understands Lord Ferdinand real well.

I chuckled to myself, which made Lord Ferdinand grimace. He looked pretty averse to following Lady Rozemyne’s advice.

“I remember you being so graceful with the harspiel, Lord Ferdinand,” Sergius said. “I would love to hear you play.”

As it turned out, Sergius had gone to the Royal Academy at around the same time as Lord Ferdinand. He was one of the attendants who had asked to support Lord Ferdinand when we arrived in Ahrensbach, and although I didn’t fully trust him yet, I could see the respect and admiration in his eyes.

Sergius explained that there were some in Ahrensbach who knew how excellent Lord Ferdinand was and were enthusiastic about having him here to assist with work. Specifically, there were some higher-ups who considered certain duties too heavy to be entrusted to Lady Detlinde. The dream was for us to slowly get them on our side.

“As you are soon to be Lady Letizia’s teacher, I think it would be productive for you to demonstrate your talents,” Sergius continued. “Perhaps you could play during the welcoming feast. Or should we arrange for you to play on some other occasion?”

Ferdinand gave a defeated sigh, having at last given up now that even Sergius was against him. "I will play some harspiel at the feast. Now leave me be."

"As you wish."

His plan was to arrange the new song that Lady Rozemyne had given him, and with those preliminary arrangements complete, we left Lord Ferdinand alone. Only his guard knight Eckhart would be staying with him.

As I put together my room and unpacked my luggage, the only thought running through my mind was how I could go about getting my hands on a servants' uniform.

"Sergius, allow me to wash up the teacups and such," I said.

"I shall join you. I cannot yet allow you to move around on your own," he replied. Though he was attending to Lord Ferdinand, he was also here to keep me under observation.

"I appreciate it. Memorizing directions is something of a weakness of mine."

I got Sergius to carry the dishes, while I picked up the heavier items like the teapot, and together we made our way through the servants' hallway toward the kitchen.

I don't feel great about this, but... you gotta do what you gotta do.

I waited until we came across a servant, who moved to the wall to let us pass, then purposefully bumped into him, spilling some of the leftover tea and honey on his clothes in the process.

"Sorry!" I exclaimed. "That was entirely my fault."

"U-Um... Think nothing of it, my lord," the servant replied. "I will just have to wash my uniform."

"Indeed, Justus," Sergius added. "You do not need to worry. The servant is at fault for not being careful enough."

I shook my head with a grave expression. "No, that won't do. In Ehrenfest, even nobles have to take responsibility for mistakes like this. I realize that I'm in Ahrensbach now, but turning a blind eye to it all just wouldn't sit right with me. Sergius, can you take this teapot for me? I need to go apologize to this man's superior."

"You know I cannot let you do that..."

"Understandable. How about if you accompany me there once we're done?"

Sergius paused for a moment, then heaved an annoyed sigh and said, "Very well." It was becoming even more apparent that he had been ordered not to leave me to my own devices.

"I realize this is an inconvenience," I said, turning to the servant, "but you'll need to come with us. I'll apologize to your superior and get you a new uniform. You can't be expected to work in that one."

Naturally, a mere servant was in no position to talk back to a

noble. We headed to the kitchen, where Sergius and I washed up our teapot and cups, then I pushed for the three of us to meet with the superior of the now cringing servant. There I explained the circumstances, apologized, and asked to be taken to where new uniforms were provided.

“There is no need for you, a noble, to go to such lengths for a servant,” Sergius noted.

“I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself otherwise, and Lord Ferdinand would have some choice words for me,” I said, forcing my way through with a smile. I then apologized to the servant once again, paid for his new uniform, and oversaw him receiving it.

Hm. Looks like they aren’t checking names or faces. Means I’ll just need some money and a noble to accompany me.

After confirming the process for obtaining a new uniform, I waited several days, then met with Eckhart and Lord Ferdinand. It was during our talk that I arranged for Sergius to be given a job of some sort that would give me time to work unobserved. I then changed the color of my hair, messed with my face, and dirtied my clothes enough that they resembled the servants’ uniforms.

“Eckhart, take this man to get a new uniform,” Lord Ferdinand instructed.

“Yes, my lord!”

And so, we went to the uniform room with a note from Lord Ferdinand. Eckhart used the same excuses as I had a few days prior, handed over the necessary fee, and then used the note to secure my new clothes.

“Ehrenfest nobles certainly are strange,” the person in charge of the uniforms said. “Surely there is no need for you to be so concerned about servants.”

Eckhart shook his head. “We have a saint in Ehrenfest who grants compassion even to orphans. Our lord would have harsh words for us if we were to treat the servants poorly.”

“They sound very saintly indeed,” the man remarked with a sympathetic smile while handing over the uniform.

“You have my utmost thanks. Now, I must return to work,” I said, separating from Eckhart once I was in my uniform and making my way to the servants’ hallway. From there, I headed to Lady Georgine’s villa. It was time for some reconnaissance.

I mingled with the working servants and gathered some intelligence, then slipped into a storage room used only by servants and changed back into my attendant uniform. From there, I used waschen to clean myself and remove the dye from my hair, then returned to Lord Ferdinand’s room as if nothing had happened.

“Justus, where were you?”

“Ah, Sergius. Did Lord Ferdinand not tell you?”

“He said that you had gone to the brewing room, but I did not see you there.”

“We must have missed each other. I made some recovery potions and then went to the kitchen.”

My excuse wasn't wholly untrue; one of the kitchen servants was a gossip woman who loved talking to anyone who would listen, so I had gone there to peel some potatoffels. She had given me a lot of useful information.

After brushing off Sergius's questions, I presented some tea to Lord Ferdinand. “Were you able to finish the harspiel song?”

“Yes. I intend to debut it tomorrow,” he replied with a derisive smirk. He looked to be fairly confident in himself, so I assumed there was nothing to worry about—but he then placed a sound-blocking magic tool on the table, positioned behind the teapot so that only I could see it.

I took the magic tool while pretending to set down the sweet I was eating.

“Sergius—prepare a bath, if you would,” Lord Ferdinand said. “I wish to take one before dinner.”

“As you will.”

The moment Sergius turned around, Lord Ferdinand muttered, “Your report?” It was much harder for us to converse in secret now that we were in Ahrensbach, since we had even more eyes on us than expected, but the two of us and Eckhart were the only ones in the room right now. We needed to make the most of what little time we had.

“It seems that the people here don't have very high opinions of Ehrenfest,” I said, preparing the bed and desk while I delivered my report so that it wouldn't be obvious that we were talking when Sergius returned. “The general consensus is that we've been much too uncooperative, even though our own Lady Georgine is the first wife.”

People had a lot of sympathy for Lady Georgine, who had come from Ehrenfest but received practically no support since Lord Sylvester became the archduke. They thought it was unbecoming that, after receiving our very own saint with an abundance of mana, we had chosen to focus on climbing the rankings rather than helping those around us.

“I seem to recall Lady Veronica dedicating a large chunk of our budget to Ahrensbach, since she had valued the connection between our duchies so dearly. Now, I wonder who spread these rumors?” I pondered aloud.

“I imagine Ehrenfest was simply a convenient scapegoat for

Ahrensbach's discontent," Lord Ferdinand replied.

"Indeed. Moreover, it seems that Lady Georgine's faction contains many vassals from the late second wife. She was the mother of Ahrensbach's successor and on bad terms with the previous first wife from the very start, it seems, but treated Lady Georgine well when she came to be the third wife."

Incidentally, after the second wife was executed and Ahrensbach lost its successors, the first wife's granddaughter had been adopted to serve as a successor instead. The second wife's faction had apparently moved wholesale to support Lady Georgine.

"Their reason for choosing Lady Georgine was in part because they opposed the first wife, but also because they thought Lady Letizia was much too young. The mana shortage only made things worse. The duchy had already lost archduke candidates and was struggling to supply mana to its foundation when the priests tasked with filling its chalices were suddenly moved to the Sovereignty, creating another dramatic shortage for them to wrestle with. And on top of all that, Ahrensbach was entrusted with managing Old Werkestock, meaning it had even more land to oversee."

Not to mention that, as the king did not own the Grutrissheit, he was unable to redraw the borders. Ahrensbach was stuck managing land that they didn't even own, and the resulting burden was immense.

"The first wife prioritized most things above pouring resources into Old Werkestock," I continued. "In the people's eyes, what mattered most was keeping Ahrensbach alive. And then, in the midst of all this, Lady Georgine somehow acquired chalices of mana to be used for Werkestock. She thus earned the respect of the second wife's faction *and* the people of Old Werkestock."

"I see. Those must have been the outside chalices Bezewanst brought to the temple..." Ferdinand said, crossing his arms with a heavy sigh. I watched him out of the corner of my eye while making sure that nothing dangerous had been slipped into his bed.

"The people of Ahrensbach see Ehrenfest as cruel for ignoring Lady Georgine's pleas, especially when our aub's adoption of the Saint of Ehrenfest gave us so much extra leeway. Of course, we never actually had any leeway, but for the people living in Old Werkestock, their very lives depended on those chalices."

"It is unreasonable for Ahrensbach to rely on Ehrenfest, of all duchies... but I suppose it was inevitable that they would react poorly to losing their lifeline on such short notice. Georgine's support base is larger than I expected..." Lord Ferdinand replied, furrowing his brow as he fell into thought.

"Lady Georgine has the support of the second wife's faction and

those from Werkestock—and of course, neither she nor those backing her support Lady Letizia being raised as the next aub. Many in the villa consider it a problem that Lady Letizia will one day become the archduchess. They even say that there is no need for her to be trained as a successor when they already have Lady Detlinde. I got the impression that the king's decree and the aub's dying wish are still relatively unknown here," I explained. "Those are my most important findings; I will wait for another opportunity to inform you who is on good terms with whom and which vegetables are the freshest."

It was then that Lord Ferdinand stood up—a clear indication that Sergius had finished preparing the bath. "Justus, I entrust these magic tools to you," he said.

"Understood."

Lord Ferdinand played the harspiel during the feast, expressing his gratitude for having been welcomed into Ahrensbach. He started with several songs that were well known across Yurgenschmidt, then transitioned into several that he had received from Lady Rozemyne and arranged. The most recent told a tale of nostalgia for one's distant homeland.

Just as Lady Rozemyne had anticipated, the women were enraptured by Lord Ferdinand's singing voice and welcomed him with open arms. They surrounded him the moment he finished playing and started bombarding him with invitations for winter socializing. Our future here in Ahrensbach would depend on how many allies we could make, so it was crucial that he attend as many gatherings as possible.

"Your harspiel playing is as wonderful as ever, Lord Ferdinand," one woman said. "Could it be that your ditter skills are just as sharp?"

"No, time has certainly dulled them," Lord Ferdinand replied. "I was able to best Heisshitze with ease back in the Royal Academy, but my recent battle against him was much too close."

"Lord Heisshitze?!" a knight exclaimed. "He's still on active duty in Dunkelfelger, so you can't have been too rusty!"

Lord Ferdinand gave an invincible grin; all this talk about his harspiel and ditter talents was starting to win over even those who had looked down on him as a motherless archduke candidate from the temple of a bottom-ranking duchy.

"Ohoho!" Lady Detlinde let out a proud chuckle from beside Lord Ferdinand. "He *is* my fiancé, after all."

Ah... His smile broadened.

Upon hearing Lady Detlinde's smug declaration, Lord Ferdinand had immediately donned the fake smile he wore when presented with someone he loathed. I discreetly made sure I had some stomach pain medicine on hand.

The Start of a Busy Winter

“You have quite a murderous expression, Cornelius. He will notice if you do not contain yourself at least somewhat,” Leonore quietly warned as she leaned against me, smiling sweetly.

I exhaled and stopped glaring at Giebe Gerlach. We were in the busy grand hall, and the Feast of Beginnings was soon to start. It was my first time participating in winter socializing wearing the clothes of a proper adult knight.

In truth, I wanted to kick the giebe in his smug face here and now—but that wasn’t a wise move. Things weren’t like before, when we had possessed agonizingly little evidence to justify his imprisonment. Now, we had all that we needed. Giving him cause for concern would only complicate things, so I did my best to force a smile.

“I’ll be more careful,” I reassured Leonore. “I just can’t help but tense up when I think about how it’s finally time.”

“One certainly cannot help feeling restless.”

The purge was on the horizon, and although the knights who knew this appeared calm at first glance, there was a particular sharpness in their eyes. Meanwhile, the nobles of the former Veronica faction were having rousing discussions about Lady Georgine’s visit and Lord Ferdinand leaving for Ahrensbach. There was much to pay attention to, such as whether all the key suspects were here or whether they had caught on to our plans.

“Once again, Ewigeliebe the God of Life has hidden away Geduldh the Goddess of Earth,” Aub Ehrenfest announced, beginning the feast. “We must all pray for the return of spring.”

Aub Ehrenfest went on to explain that Lord Ferdinand had departed for Ahrensbach ahead of schedule, with Hartmut having been assigned as the High Priest in his place to support Rozemyne in the temple. Once he had delivered this news, it was time for the baptisms and debuts. Lord Melchior had been baptized in the spring and would be participating in this winter’s debut. He had been practicing the harspiel with Rozemyne, since he enjoyed her playing.

Rozemyne and Hartmut—the High Bishop and the new High Priest, respectively—were already on the stage, preparing for the baptism ceremony. Hartmut helped Rozemyne up onto a small platform, after which she began to speak.

“We welcome the new children of Ehrenfest.”

Using a magic tool to amplify her voice, Rozemyne performed the greeting and told the relevant biblical tales—duties that had previously fallen to Lord Ferdinand. She spoke of the gods in her still youthful voice, keeping the bible closed all the while, in part to deceive those who knew it had been tampered with.

“There has been a noticeable change in how Lady Rozemyne carries herself. There’s a newfound sharpness to her eyes,” Leonore remarked. “She’s looked especially troubled lately—so much so that Rihyarda has started to worry.”

“She looks troubled because she’s still so upset about Lord Ferdinand no longer being here,” I replied.

There had been a dramatic change in Rozemyne’s relationship with Lord Ferdinand on the day that his departure was settled. The two had gone into his hidden room, and since then, Rozemyne had begun expressing her fondness for Lord Ferdinand without hesitation. Their sudden closeness had been apparent in their conversations too; it was our job as guards to stick close to our lord or lady at all times, so we could gauge such changes with ease.

They had also given each other gifts—although this wasn’t unusual in itself, considering the circumstances. One would normally give a present of some sort when someone close to them was being married into another duchy, and the one leaving would give away what they would not be bringing with them. The unusual part had been the actual farewell gift: a meal at the Italian restaurant. It had confused me at first, but after Rozemyne framed it as her thanking both Lord Ferdinand and her retainers for all their hard work, it had seemed a lot less strange.

But what happened next was even harder to understand.

Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand had then gifted each other feystone charms, each having wanted to surprise the other. Charms on that level were given only by the most overprotective of parents, but there had been nothing that could stop Hartmut after Rozemyne had asked for his assistance.

Had they been normal charms, I wouldn’t be so concerned, but...

Although none of us wanted the political marriage, I found it very problematic that Lord Ferdinand had given Rozemyne feystones of a much greater quality and with so much more mana than the one he had given his fiancée. The gift should have gone to Lady Detlinde instead, and I couldn’t have been the only person who thought so. Had Rozemyne been of age instead of a student, everyone would have interpreted the offering as an outright marriage proposal.

“I truly did not expect Lord Ferdinand to give such a charm in the form of a hair ornament,” Leonore said. “It caught me off guard, to say the least.”

“Eckhart said that it was nothing to be surprised about, since Lord Ferdinand has given her charms so many times before, and that it isn’t our place to comment on their gifts, but... still. It really doesn’t make sense, does it?”

Rozemyne had received five rainbow feystones connected to a hair stick via mana chains. Eckhart, Justus, and Hartmut had been the only ones not shocked to see it; all the other retainers had stared at it with wide eyes. Rozemyne had looked to be surprised as well, but the way she had muttered about being “beaten fivefold” suggested that it was for a different reason than the rest of us.

“Still, does Lord Wilfried really have nothing to say about Rozemyne wearing so many charms from Lord Ferdinand...?” I asked.

Once a pair got married and started mixing their mana, their mana quality would grow to be similar. Their mana would then influence that of their children, so most husbands would be vehemently against their wives wearing something containing the mana of a man other than her father. It certainly wasn’t something I would be able to tolerate; were Leonore to put on a charm from another man, guardian or otherwise, I would ask her to remove it immediately.

“Perhaps he sees that charm as being no different from the others,” Leonore ventured. “I imagine that he sees Lord Ferdinand protecting Lady Rozemyne as completely natural. Not to mention, he is too young for his mana sensing to have developed, so he may not fully understand his place as her fiancé. Once he grows old enough to take issue with the hair stick, perhaps he will choose to give her a feystone of his own.” She then placed a hand to her chest, and a bright smile spread across her lips. “One lovely aspect of being a woman is having the charms and feystones you received from your father be slowly replaced by those from your future husband.”

Beneath her shirt was the proposal feystone that I had given her. All of a sudden, I was struck with the urge to make her even more charms.

“Not to mention,” Leonore continued, “Lady Rozemyne really does need that charm, for her own safety. As her retainers, we should rejoice that Lord Wilfried does not yet find it repulsive. I never would have thought her capable of performing such an advanced blessing...”

Leonore was referring to the blessing that Rozemyne had given before Lord Ferdinand departed. According to Rozemyne herself, she had channeled the joy of receiving an estate to turn into a library directly into her prayer. Rather than unleashing her raw mana with the standard “Praise be to the gods!” however, she had used her shtappe to give a circle blessing of all elements.

The magic circle that Rozemyne had used was known only to High

Bishops, meaning that not even Lord Ferdinand had seen it before. It had shone with the divine color of each god as she chanted their names, then finally produced a rainbow blessing that had rained down on its recipients. The sight had been so dreamlike that I had let out an awed breath despite myself—though I was far from the only one who had been so amazed.

It had been my first time seeing a blessing that included every single element; before then, my only exposure to them had been through books that described successful examples. There was normally no need to use such blessings—and, in truth, I had always assumed that Life would prevent them from functioning entirely.

Anyone who witnessed such a tremendous sight would find it hard to deny that Rozemyne was a saint. In the heat of the moment, even I had been convinced that she was the real deal. Hartmut had been so over the moon about it all that dealing with him had been a complete pain. It still was, in fact, since he was still just as excited.

“It really was unthinkable,” Leonore continued. “I do not think there is a single duchy that does not want the Saint of Ehrenfest for itself. The aub told us not to mention the prayer to anyone, but Lady Rozemyne has developed a habit of getting emotional and then channeling those emotions into a prayer. We do not know when she might do it again, nor can we say who might target her as a result.”

Rozemyne had collapsed more than enough times at the Royal Academy due to containing her emotions and not releasing them through prayer. As I understood it, she had stopped passing out now that her remaining mana clumps had dissolved in the jureve, but her tendency to give impromptu blessings was unchanged.

“When you put it like that, it isn’t too surprising that Lord Ferdinand would give Rozemyne a rainbow charm and attempt to bind her to Ehrenfest with a library,” I said. “I can barely handle my worry when she leaves for the Royal Academy without me.”

I was worried about how things would go down with the children of the former Veronica faction, and the fact that it was impossible to predict what Rozemyne might do just made it even more terrifying. There was a chance that she might wreak havoc with interduchy relations, but I was even more concerned about the royal family. Given how many times they had gotten involved with Rozemyne already, I saw no reason to believe that they wouldn’t continue the trend this year.

“I will remain on full alert at the Royal Academy,” Leonore assured me. “You must do as Lord Eckhart said; right, Cornelius? Focus your efforts on that, if you would.”

“Yeah. I was reminded just how superior Eckhart is all over again.”

All in all, I considered myself a pretty capable guard knight. I had gotten better at my studies by tutoring Angelica, increased my mana through Rozemyne's compression method, endured training with Grandfather, secured a role in the sword dance, and performed well enough at the Royal Academy to have been recognized as an honor student each year I was in attendance. Compared to Eckhart, though, I still had a long way to go.

"Confirming the presence of poison is the work of attendants, not guard knights," Leonore noted.

"Still, it's hard to deny that a guard knight needs to know how to protect their lord or lady in every way. Plus, if you think about it... Angelica has speed, Damuel has mana control, Judithe has range, and you have strategies and feybeast knowledge. I'm the only one without a specialty."

Someone more generous might have described me as a jack-of-all-trades, but I clearly lost to the others in every way. I didn't want to be at the very bottom.

"There is no reason to feel so down," Leonore said, consoling me with a gentle smile. "If you ask me, being competent in all areas makes you rather strong. You have conquered your weaknesses such that none remain. Is that not wondrous? Furthermore, you have more mana than any of us." Her praise was genuinely relieving to hear.

"Leonore, how about we start cleaning our estate when spring comes? Just as Lord Ferdinand gave his estate to Rozemyne, Eckhart gave his to me," I said. Eckhart had once lived there with his late wife, Heidemarie, but his move to Ahrensbach meant that he no longer had much use for it. "In return, we've set aside a room in which to store Eckhart's most precious belongings."

Eckhart had apparently been told to leave the items that were truly important to him here in Ehrenfest until the situation in Ahrensbach was clearer. He had thus moved everything that reminded him of Heidemarie into one room. I still remembered the way he had regretfully stroked the door before locking it.

"Oh, also," I continued, "Lamprecht said that furniture is best chosen by the wife, since she spends more time in the estate, but..."

"Cornelius, has Lady Elvira not taught you to only invite your partner to your estate after formally proposing to them?" Leonore asked. "I will tell on you." Her lips were pursed in a show of dissatisfaction, but there was a mischievous light in her indigo eyes that proved she was only teasing me.

"After your graduation ceremony, then?"

"I am looking forward to it," Leonore giggled.

Lord Melchior's performance began soon after. Rozemyne listened with a nostalgic smile as he played a song to the Goddess of Spring

which she had composed and Lord Ferdinand arranged.

The baptism and debut concluded without incident—much to my disappointment. I had hoped that someone would make a fuss about Rozemyne not opening the bible, declaring that it must be a fake, but for some reason, nobody had even tried.

After the Feast of Beginnings, Rozemyne made her way to the playroom; she would be visiting every single day until she needed to leave for the Royal Academy. The newly baptized children all greeted her, and she immediately began looking into how things were being run. She was busy motivating the children with sweets, giving instructions to Lord Melchior's retainers, and going over the year's study plan with Moritz, on top of doing her own studying.

Lord Wilfried was taking the lead in playing with the children; he was good at making the games exciting and then seamlessly transitioning into studying. As for Lord Melchior, he didn't seem to consider himself much of an archduke candidate yet and was simply taking this opportunity to play with his brother. He would presumably become more self-aware when it came time for him to join his siblings in the Royal Academy.

Lady Charlotte was working alongside Lady Florencia to house the children of those guilty by association, so she hadn't appeared in the playroom since her initial greeting. It seemed that she had taken Rozemyne's advice and planned to use the orphanage as a template for how to raise them. I had heard that she was deviating from the original plan by combining individual rooms into shared spaces where children could lick each other's wounds and support each other as fellow victims.

Nikolaus will be going there too.

I looked at my half-brother Nikolaus, who was glancing in my direction as I stood guard behind Rozemyne. His mother, Trudeliede, had given her name to Lady Veronica and was currently leaning more on Lady Georgine's side.

According to Mother, Trudeliede had been Lady Veronica's attendant before marrying Father. She despised Lord Ferdinand, whom she saw as the source of her lady's pain; disliked Rozemyne, whom she believed to be a former commoner due to circulating rumors; and was displeased with the archduke, who had imprisoned her lady in the Ivory Tower.

Our estate had accumulated a great deal of information due to it being Rozemyne's home and Father being the archduke's guard knight. Trudeliede was on the chopping block for leaking that information to nobles who had given their name to Lady Georgine. She wouldn't be executed, but she would end up imprisoned and

would continuously have her mana stolen, as I understood it.

“Cornelius, there is a dark look on your face,” Rozemyne said.

“Did something happen?”

“No, Lady Rozemyne.”

As long as Nikolaus accepted his mother’s crime and sought to be spared, Father would doubtless take him home and raise him.

Personally, though, I wanted to keep him as far away from us as possible. There was no knowing what ideas Trudeliede had put in his head, and we couldn’t yet confirm that he didn’t hold some kind of grudge against Rozemyne.

Heh... I'm pretty overprotective too, huh?

The day for Lady Rozemyne to leave for the Royal Academy came soon enough. Lord Wilfried was already at the teleportation circle, having finished his preparations ahead of time. Aub Ehrenfest was watching him quietly.

“Wilfried, I am leaving the children of the former Veronica faction in your hands.”

“Yes, Father. I will save as many of them as I can.”

It was agreed that no students would return home from the Royal Academy this year, so as to avoid the purge being interrupted or any information leaking. They would only be informed of everything when the archducal family arrived for the Interduchy Tournament.

As soon as Lord Wilfried was gone, it was Rozemyne’s turn. Her luggage was first placed on the circle and teleported. The plan was for her to spread printed stories in the Royal Academy, so she was bringing a great many books with her. There was no hiding the broad smile across her face as she gazed at the boxes they were being stored in. Her expression was the complete antithesis of the solemn resolve that her brother had departed with.

While her luggage was being sent over, Rozemyne exchanged brief words with all those who had come to see her off. This was my first time experiencing it, since I had always left for the Royal Academy before her. “I entrust you with the winter playroom,” she said to Lord Melchior, who was feeling down about being the only one left in the northern building. She then turned to Lady Charlotte and said, “See you tomorrow.”

Hartmut wouldn’t stop giving air to his worries now that Rozemyne had lost her most trusted ally, so it came as a relief to see that she and the aub’s other children were getting along like proper siblings. Hartmut was just overthinking things; Rozemyne had plenty of people supporting her.

“You may leave this side of things to us,” Lady Florencia said with a smile, then peered down at Rozemyne with slight concern. “Take

great care, Rozemyne; the jureve has impacted your health and mana in ways that you surely cannot predict.”

“I will,” Rozemyne replied, then turned to face Grandfather. “I know you have many plans for the winter, but do not overexert yourself.”

The purge wasn’t due to take place until after the Lord of Winter hunt, as we didn’t want to sacrifice any of our manpower right before such a critical time of year. The fact that both events were happening back-to-back would already place a heavy burden on the knights—and the struggle was only exacerbated by us having lost Lord Ferdinand and Eckhart, two of our strongest fighters. Grandfather was participating in the hunt and the purge this year to help fill the hole that remained.

“Don’t you worry. You can count on me,” Grandfather replied. He was so glad to be in Rozemyne’s thoughts that I wanted to openly insist that there really was nothing for her to worry about. Back when we had been planning the purge, he had seemed especially eager, even going as far as to declare “I shall go first!” and “We should prioritize the purge before anything else! All we need to defeat the Lord of Winter are a few rejuvenation potions!” Of course, the Knight’s Order had swiftly refused on both fronts.

“Rozemyne, don’t get too carried away over there,” Father said.

“I look forward to you bringing back more tales about blossoming romance,” Mother added.

After speaking to our parents, Rozemyne turned to us, her retainers. “Damuel, Angelica, Cornelius—I realize it will not be easy for you to visit the temple on top of your usual knightly duties, but I trust you to handle it all without issue,” she said.

“Yes, milady!”

This was going to be my first time carrying out winter duties. I was nervous for all sorts of reasons, but Damuel had mentioned there being sweets that were only served in the winter, so I was a little enthusiastic as well.

“Hartmut, I entrust the Dedication Ritual and the orphanage to you,” Rozemyne said. “Are you... sure that you will be okay without me?”

“You may count on me,” Hartmut replied. “Please focus on enjoying student life at the Royal Academy. If anything happens in the orphanage, I will inform you by letter.”

“I thank you ever so much. I shall be off, then. I will deliver your letter to Clarissa without fail,” Rozemyne said, punctuating this promise with a serious glance at Hartmut. He needed to inform Clarissa that he had entered the temple. I was fairly confident that she would pay the news no mind and come to Ehrenfest anyway, but not

everyone shared my view.

As the conversation approached its natural conclusion, Aub Ehrenfest stepped forward. “Rozemyne, you may end up meeting with Prince Hildebrand again this year,” he said. “I want you to avoid going to the library. Er, at least until socializing season, that is.”

“Understood,” Rozemyne replied with a smile and a nod. It was a surprising reaction for someone who had proven her obsession time and time again; even the aub was taken aback. “I intend to go to Raimund and Professor Hirschur’s laboratory when not supplying mana to Schwartz and Weiss—I will need to make magic tools for my library, after all. We can also have Raimund deliver letters to Ferdinand for us, since Raimund is his disciple. So, yeah—understood.”

Rozemyne waved at us with a smile, then stepped onto the teleporter with Rihyarda. They vanished a moment later, and with that, all of us who had gathered to see Rozemyne off started to disperse. We all left the teleporter room and headed back to our own rooms.

I was due to attend a meeting with my fellow retainers about our upcoming plans. Hartmut had been obstinate about not wanting Rozemyne to hear any of the gruesome details, so we had scheduled it for after her departure. We borrowed a random meeting room and then delved straight into our discussion. There was a lot we had to do.

“So, allow me to summarize,” Damuel said. “First, we gather intelligence during winter socializing. Second, we move to the temple for the Dedication Ritual. The Lord of Winter hunt should take place during or directly after the Dedication Ritual, and the purge immediately after that. Finally, we have the cleanup and the running of the orphanage. Hm... Now that I say it all out loud, we really have our work cut out for us.”

I nodded. Our schedules were full to bursting—but we were still prepared to play the role of blue priests to ensure that Rozemyne could spend an entire term at the Royal Academy. Hartmut had rested a hand on my shoulder and said, “As you’re her older brother, offering up a little mana is nothing when it means letting her live properly as a student, no?” He really was ruthless when it was for Rozemyne’s sake.

“Still, why are Giebe Gerlach and the others dedicating their whole lives to Lady Georgine?” I asked, partly out of annoyance that they were making my winter so busy. “The land they rule is here in Ehrenfest, so what’s the point of them being so loyal to someone in Ahrensbach?”

Hartmut shrugged. “They clearly have a reason. Just imagine Lady Rozemyne being in Lady Georgine’s position and you being in Giebe Gerlach’s. Both sides only want to please their lady—it’s as simple as

that. Though we'll absolutely have to eliminate them, since their dedication borders on insanity—and that's dangerous to Lady Rozemyne."

Huh. So you're aware that your own obsession borders on insanity too, then?

That was news to me.

Out of Time

“You aren’t paying attention to your surroundings, Matthias,” Laurenz said. “Your mind needs to be focused on the hunt. Aren’t you the one always telling me that?”

I couldn’t deny that I was at fault—I had allowed a feybeast on the larger side to distract me and subsequently missed a smaller feybeast that had managed to get behind me. I sighed and turned around, brushing aside my bangs.

“My apologies, Laurenz. Thanks for the assist.”

I had arrived at the Royal Academy early, now a fifth-year, and then ventured out to gather materials with Laurenz, now a fourth-year, as soon as he arrived. Ehrenfest’s gathering spot had been rich with mana ever since Lady Rozemyne regenerated it with a blessing, and the materials it produced now tended to have either numerous elements or plentiful mana.

Of course, this increase in the quality of materials also meant that the feybeasts coming to eat them were stronger than usual. Laurenz and I had come alone, assuming that things would be the same as last year, but it was clear now that we would want another helper or two for our next visit.

“We’ve got a decent haul, so let’s call it a day. What’s on your mind, anyway?” Laurenz asked, swiping his schtappe sword through the air to make it disappear and then fixing me with a hard stare. I could see the exasperation in his orange eyes as he started stuffing his ingredients into a leather pouch.

I put my own ingredients into my pouch, produced my highbeast, and then jumped onto it. “This whole name-swearing thing...” I replied. “Did your parents not demand that you offer up your name, Laurenz?”

“They did, but I followed your advice and evaded the subject by saying that I would do it after coming of age,” Laurenz said, sounding annoyed, as he climbed atop his own highbeast.

My father had similarly ordered me to offer my name to Lady Georgine, but Laurenz and I were still growing our mana using the compression method that my father had learned from Lady Georgine. In most cases, it was better to wait until you came of age and your mana stopped growing before offering your name, since you could then gather and use ingredients that were best suited to your final

mana quantity. Of course, waiting was less important if you already had materials that you were very unlikely to outgrow—as had been the case for Roderick, who had received ingredients of very high quality from the ternisbefallen hunt.

In truth, Laurenz and I had received some high-quality ingredients from the hunt as well, but we were keeping that a secret from our parents to delay ourselves having to make a decision.

“You met Lady Georgine in the summer, right?” Laurenz asked. “What’d you think?”

“I thought, well... ‘That’s my father’s lady for you.’”

Lady Georgine’s visit had taken place after the midpoint of summer. Laurenz’s parents had actively hosted meals and tea parties in the Noble’s Quarter during her stay, but Laurenz had been made to hold the fort in their absence, so he hadn’t actually met with Lady Georgine.

I had similarly been left behind in Gerlach, but Lady Georgine had stayed at our estate for a night during her frantic return to Ahrensbach, which had given me an opportunity to see her. The whole visit had been treated as a spur-of-the-moment decision, but the fact that a room had already been ready for her upon her arrival suggested that it had been planned well in advance—as did the fact that my father had returned home by highbeast before Lady Georgine had even departed from the castle in Ehrenfest.

On the day that Lady Georgine arrived, the nobles who had given their name to her gathered in my family estate. It was a secret meeting of very few people, all of whom had arrived on highbeasts without any attendants. I was not permitted to join them, since I had yet to give Lady Georgine my name, and my father had ordered me to stay in my room.

Incidentally, Lady Georgine had known that I was an honor student and wished to meet me. Father had immediately contacted my attendant, who had dressed me at once and then brought me along to this meeting of adherents.

By the time I arrived, everyone had already finished eating and moved to our estate’s parlor. The fireplace was lit for some reason, despite it being the end of summer, and I could hear the occasional crackle of burning wood. The adherents had formed a circle around Lady Georgine, who was wearing a gentle smile; it was clear at a glance that she was their sworn lady.

All of a sudden, the eyes of every person in the room fell on me. I nervously stepped forward, knelt before Lady Georgine as politely as I could, and said, “I am Giebe Gerlach’s son, Matthias. May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the

vibrant summer rays of Leidenschaft the God of Fire?”

“You may.”

After I gave the blessing and we finished our initial greetings, Lady Georgine reached toward me. The next thing I knew, her cold fingers were stroking my temple.

“I much appreciate skilled children who know the value of hard work. Grausam, you have raised a fine son,” she said, her oh-so-red lips curving into a grin. Her sweet aroma numbed my senses and made my head spin. Her narrowed, dark-green eyes contained a darkness of unfathomable depth, sending a shiver down my spine. Despite the warmth of the room, my blood ran cold in my veins.

I recognize those eyes.

They looked just as insane as my father’s as he sought to serve his lady with maddening determination. She was facing me as she spoke, but her gaze was locked onto something else entirely. It was as though she looked straight through me—and everyone else, for that matter. Her only focus was her objective, and, while I didn’t know what that objective was, my instincts told me that she was someone to fear.

“Your praise honors me,” my father replied. “I did not expect Matthias to grow into such a fine young man myself, but being wrong is sometimes a blessing.” He actually sounded proud, which was strange, considering that I couldn’t remember him ever complimenting me before.

I could only listen in silence, continuing to kneel with my head bowed low. I couldn’t understand why my father placed Lady Georgine at the center of his universe.

Gah. I want to go back to my room already.

Unfortunately, I was forced to stay at the meeting. There was no way for me to leave—especially not after what Lady Georgine said next, her bewitching smile never faltering.

“Attention, everyone. I have a wonderful announcement. It seems that, after all this time, I will soon be able to obtain Ehrenfest’s foundation.”

“Truly?!” Father exclaimed. “You have removed all obstacles?”

“No, not yet. But I am close. Oh so close...”

Lady Georgine went on to explain that her movements were still quite limited, owing to her being Aub Ahrensbach’s wife, but that she would return to obtain Ehrenfest’s foundation as soon as he passed away. Owning the foundation made one the aub. In other words, if she were to secure the foundation and then take Lord Sylvester’s life, she would automatically become the next Aub Ehrenfest.

“I will return to Ehrenfest without fail,” she said. “May I trust you to make all the necessary preparations, Grausam?”

“I shall succeed without fail. I await your return with bated

breath,” Father said, his voice dripping with emotion as he accepted a letter from Lady Georgine. It was my first time seeing him so overcome with joy.

“I will need excellent retainers in Ehrenfest,” Lady Georgine continued.

“My son Matthias has vowed to offer his name upon coming of age. He wishes to aid you from the bottom of his heart, Lady Georgine, so I am certain he will serve you well.”

“Oh my. When he comes of age?” Lady Georgine asked, turning to look at me. Her tone was joyous, but her dark-green eyes were anything but. They were scrutinizing my every move—my every reaction.

Feeling crushed beneath the weight of her gaze, I repeated the reasoning that I had given to Father. “I am growing my mana using your mana compression method, Lady Georgine, but as of yet, I do not have suitable ingredients. Once this growth ceases, I wish to gather ingredients anew. Will you accept my name then, my lady?”

“My, my... I see. Your mana has grown so much that the ingredients you gathered last year will no longer suffice. As one would expect from an honor student. Of course I shall accept your name, Matthias. I look forward to seeing how much more you grow.”

The atmosphere of the room was bizarre and mystical. It was crucial that I keep my wits about me at all times, else I feared that it would suck me in with Lady Georgine’s adherents. I balled my hands into tight fists as I endured, never letting my noble smile falter for a moment.

“So we have until we come of age...” Laurenz said with a sigh as we flew through the air. “Looks like fate’s demanding that we give our names to Aub Ehrenfest. The problem is, we don’t know whether that’ll be Lord Sylvester or Lady Georgine.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. We children of the former Veronica faction had two options: separate from our houses and give our names to the current archducal family, or stick with our houses and give our names to Lady Georgine.

“Both of my brothers gave their names to Lady Georgine during her visit,” I said. “They’ll probably take after Father and dedicate their lives to serving her. I can’t make that decision yet, but who’s to say that she won’t suddenly turn the tables on Lord Sylvester, in the same way that he suddenly turned the tables on Lady Veronica? All the more so if she knows she can get the foundation.”

I could serve the current archducal family or wait for Lady Georgine to return and serve her instead... In truth, choosing a side seemed absolutely impossible.

“All I know is, Father is serious about ensuring that Lady Georgine becomes the next Aub Ehrenfest. He had some kind of plan back in the autumn.”

“Really?”

“I can’t say for sure... They’re leaving me in the dark, since I didn’t offer my name to Lady Georgine.”

My noticing really had been a coincidence. Father had summoned me while preparing for winter socializing—and while he was ordering me to acquire honor student grades at the Royal Academy next year for Lady Georgine’s sake, I noticed a bright light come from a small teleportation circle. A moment later, something tiny bundled in cloth appeared above it.

It wasn’t particularly rare for things to be teleported over while we were gathering our things from throughout Gerlach for winter socializing. However, there was something about this particular instance that stood out to me. The cloth that had appeared was very similar to that used by Lady Rozemyne, and it didn’t look like anything that was usually teleported to Father’s room.

“I have received the package. Get rid of the circle at once,” Father said to an ordonnanz, then picked up the tiny bundle—small enough to hold in one hand—with a satisfied grin. He looked as pleased as he had upon hearing that Lady Georgine was due to return.

Father immediately sent the bundle away via another teleporter, then prepared a second ordonnanz. “As soon as you receive the package, burn the circle,” he said.

“This is Bettina,” came a response. “I have received the package, Giebe Gerlach.”

Upon hearing this, without a moment’s hesitation, Father burned both of his circles.

“What a waste...” I muttered on instinct. Making teleportation circles required a variety of materials.

Father shot me a cold, exasperated glare. “You must not leave loose ends, Matthias. Once something has served its purpose, destroy it. Ah, I suppose that I no longer need this either...” He took a feystone from a nearby drawer, then used his mana to reduce it to dust. It was a feystone linked to a submission ring. Somewhere, one of Father’s soldiers had just died.

“He seemed to have sent a small bundle to Lady Bettina,” I said. “Do you know anything about that, Laurenz? Her husband is your brother, Lord Freuden, right?”

“Not a thing. They moved out after getting married. That said... I heard that she sent a few things back home to help with winter

preparations. Ahrensbach's mana shortage is really harsh, apparently."

"In which case, she might have sent that tiny bundle to Ahrensbach. I don't know what Father had planned, but whatever it was, he might have succeeded. He's cautious and always adds layers of insurance to everything he does."

I wasn't sure how far Father's plan to make Lady Georgine the aub had progressed, but he had been in a good mood before my departure for the Royal Academy, so I could guess that it was going well.

"What's your plan, Matthias? Going to give your name to Lady Georgine?"

"Don't think I can do anything but wait... I don't have enough information to choose a side, nor do I know how the situation is going to develop."

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that Father was planning to assassinate Lord Sylvester; the seat of aub needed to be empty for Lady Georgine to return right away. I didn't know the details, since I hadn't given Lady Georgine my name, but Father often summoned my brothers to his room, where they spoke about plans I wasn't privy to.

"And you're not going to tell Lady Rozemyne or the aub about this?" Laurenz asked.

"To be honest, I'm agonizing over it as we speak."

If my father's intention had been to assassinate the aub and throw Ehrenfest into chaos, then I would have done everything in my power to resist Lady Georgine—even give my name to the archducal family. But, apparently, Lady Georgine had the means to obtain the foundation. And if she actually managed it, a new aub would rise to power, and my father and I would thrive as her vassals.

Above all else, if Lord Sylvester was to be discarded for the sake of a new government—in the same way that Lady Veronica had been discarded before him—then there was no reason for me to go as far as to renounce my family and give my name to the archducal family.

"Bear in mind that it would affect your family too," I said. "Are you really prepared to renounce them when we still don't know how things will turn out?"

"I like Ehrenfest as it is right now, with Lord Wilfried and Lady Rozemyne bringing everyone together. I doubt the first wife of another duchy will make things any better."

I visualized the archducal family. Apart from Lady Detlinde, Lady Georgine's children were all already married. Even if she intended to adopt a successor after becoming the next Aub Ehrenfest, she would want to use her blood ties with Lord Wilfried, Lady Charlotte, and Lord Melchior to form connections with other duchies. At the very least, their lives wouldn't be in danger.

But the same can't be said for Lady Rozemyne...

I could see her so clearly in my mind—her hair the color of the night sky, and her golden eyes looking straight at me. Not only did she have beauty beyond her youth, but she also had a sizable mana quantity and had come first-in-class two years in a row. She had introduced various trends, done a great deal to raise the next generation, and treated everyone like family, whether friend or foe. All in all, she was a model archducal family member.

Roderick had been a member of the former Veronica faction, but she had taken him as a retainer after he offered his name. I had asked him how things were going in the playroom, and, with a pleased smile, he had said that she was treating him well.

“Father says that Lady Rozemyne is a commoner who only became an apprentice blue shrine maiden through trickery,” I said. “I’m worried that she won’t be treated well if Lady Georgine becomes the next aub.”

“Sounds like you’re going to have a bad taste in your mouth no matter who you choose to side with...” Laurenz muttered, scratching his dark-green hair.

I replied with a firm nod. Laurenz and I were in a similar situation, considering that both our parents had given their names to Lady Georgine. Depending on who we gave our names to, our actions would greatly influence the other children of the former Veronica faction—and, by extension, the very future of Ehrenfest.

“I want to secure a little more time so that I can see what Father and Lady Georgine do next,” I said, then exchanged a nod with Laurenz just as we arrived back at the dormitory.

Today, Lord Wilfried and Lady Rozemyne were scheduled to arrive at the Royal Academy. We headed to the common room to welcome them, since archducal candidates passed the time there while waiting for their rooms to be prepared.

Back at home, we always had to be conscious of even the smallest shifts in faction politics. Here at the Royal Academy, however, things were a lot more comfortable—all because Lady Rozemyne had managed to break down faction barriers.

“Lord Wilfried has arrived,” came a voice.

I blinked in surprise; the proper order would have been for Lady Rozemyne to arrive first. And it seemed that I wasn’t the only one who found this odd—everyone began looking around questioningly to see who knew what.

Has she fallen ill again?

One student stepped forward. “Lord Wilfried, why has Lady Rozemyne not come? Is she in poor health?”

“No, she will be here soon,” he replied. “I was scheduled to leave

first so that she could carry out the final checks on some books we're bringing. She's going to be in charge of them henceforth. There shouldn't be any problems, considering the scholars who prepared them, but we want to be extra careful."

He let out a sigh, then gazed around the common room. His smile didn't reach his eyes, which were noticeably cautious. It was an expression rarely seen here in the Royal Academy, where faction politics was so much less prevalent—the same look he had given those of us from the former Veronica faction while Lady Rozemyne had been asleep in her jureve.

Well, it looks like we're in danger.

I swallowed hard. I didn't know much about what Father had planned, but it clearly wasn't being kept in the shadows. He had done something that impacted the archducal family directly—and they had deduced that the culprit was in the former Veronica faction.

Did something happen to Lord Sylvester?

I struggled to believe that my excessively cautious father would have been so careless as to leave any evidence behind, but the wariness with which Lord Wilfried was watching us spoke volumes.

"Matthias. Seems we don't have much more time to think things over," Laurenz whispered from where he was sitting beside me, his lips barely moving at all. He was wearing the smile of one welcoming an archduke candidate, but I could tell that he shared in my panic.

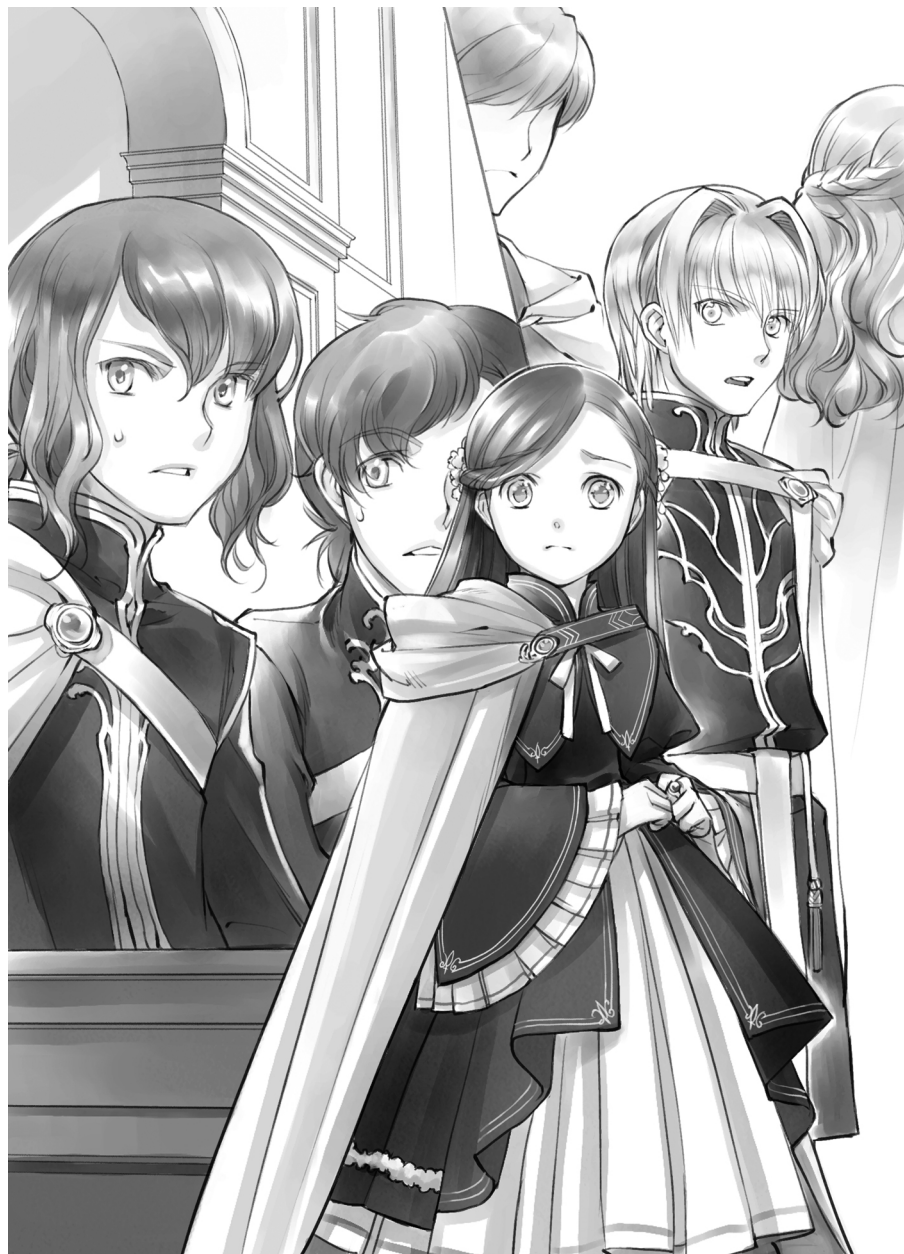
I gave a small nod in response.

Soon enough, there came another announcement: "Lady Rozemyne has arrived." It was just as Lord Wilfried had said.

We had anxiously awaited Lady Rozemyne's return, hoping that she would save us. After all, she had extended a hand to us when we were suffering from isolation and turned everyone's focus outward to competing with other duchies instead...

However, the retainers surrounding Lady Rozemyne looked as guarded as Lord Wilfried. Her guard knights, in particular, made the atmosphere as tense as it had been during the Feast of Beginnings. Back then, I had assumed that the strain was because I had been beside my father, the center of the former Veronica faction... but now I wasn't so sure. It just didn't make sense.

Worst of all, rather than telling her guards to stand down, Lady Rozemyne was merely watching us with a look of concern.



I thought that something might have happened to Lord Sylvester, but... was it actually Lady Rozemyne who was targeted...?

If the archducal family had evidence of my father's plot and was going to punish us by association, then I had no idea how many children of the former Veronica faction would survive. Of course, this meant that I was at risk as well. A part of me had assumed that Lady Rozemyne would protect those of us who weren't involved in any wrongdoing. She evaluated us more fairly than any other member of the archducal family, so if even she was turning her back on us, then our futures were very bleak indeed.

What can I do...?

I clenched my fists on my lap. If the archducal family *did* possess evidence of some kind, then I couldn't afford to hesitate. The aub had seen us off on our way to the Royal Academy, so I was confident that we would be safe until the end of the term. But after that? It was unlikely.

It's all on me... Everyone's futures depend on my next move.

I instinctively looked at Laurenz. It was clear at a glance that, like me, he was feeling sick to his stomach. We had run out of time before we knew it.

"What say we do all that we can to survive, Laurenz?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

We would seem more trustworthy if we took the initiative, rather than waiting to be summoned. Again, I didn't know what father's plan had entailed, but I was aware that Lady Georgine knew what she needed to claim the duchy's foundation. Would that information be enough to save all of our lives?

No... I'll make it enough.

"Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne," I said, balling my fists even more tightly as I slowly rose to my feet. Just the act of standing up seemed to raise tensions even higher, though, so I promptly knelt and crossed my arms in front of my chest. "I have been restlessly awaiting this opportunity to speak without interference from parents or factions. There is something I must tell you about the Goddess of Chaos, who comes to bring unrest to Ehrenfest."

Lord Wilfried and Lady Rozemyne looked at me with wide eyes. Their retainers seemed much less taken aback; rather, it was like they had obtained confirmation of some kind, and they were watching me through narrowed eyes as if not wanting to miss even the smallest detail. It was just as I suspected: Father or Lady Georgine had done *something* to the archducal family.

"It is up to you whether you believe my next words," I continued, "but I wish to tell you everything I know. We may have parents of the

former Veronica faction, but we are Ehrenfest nobles above all else. We are loyal to Aub Ehrenfest first and foremost.”

Rozemyne lowered her golden eyes, filled with concern and surprise, then looked back up at me. In the span of such a brief moment, her gaze had turned calm and quiet.

“I shall listen, Matthias,” she said.

I swallowed, then glanced at the children of the former Veronica faction behind me. “There is one thing I must ask first. My loyalty remains unfaltering, but... will Aub Ehrenfest treat us as Ehrenfest nobles?”

“What do you mean?” Lord Wilfried asked.

“Is it still the case that he will permit us to leave our families’ influence if we offer our names to the archducal family?” I asked in turn, staring intently at both him and Lady Rozemyne.

“It is. Those who offer their names will readily be accepted as retainers, even those of the former Veronica faction,” he said firmly. “At the very least, the aub and I will welcome you.”

Lady Rozemyne nodded. “If you were to offer your names to the archducal couple rather than us archduke candidates, then they would accept any name-swearing stones prepared before the Interduchy Tournament.”

“In that case... may I offer my name to you as well, Lady Rozemyne?”

The two archduke candidates didn’t seem at all surprised by my request, nor did their retainers. The reaction instead came from the other students.

As the stir continued, Lady Rozemyne raised a hand to stop her retainers, then stepped forward. “Of course, Matthias; I am prepared to accept even Giebe Gerlach’s son,” she said. In contrast to when she had hesitated over accepting Roderick’s stone, she now looked at me head-on, a strong light in her golden eyes.

Roderick was smiling at his lady from where he stood beside her. Seeing the pride that was positively radiating from him made me certain that my resolve wasn’t misplaced.

I cast my eyes downward and exhaled slowly as the faces of my family drifted through my mind. There were my brothers, so pridefully offering their names; my father, overcome with emotion while speaking to his lady; my mother, wearing such a dreamy smile... Their happiness depended on Lady Georgine. Had she enraptured me as she had them, then maybe those feelings would have been enough.

But I wanted to serve Lady Rozemyne.

I’m sorry, Father. My path is different from yours.

I shot my head up and looked around the common room. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, but I steeled my resolve and said, “Lady

Georgine came to my estate on her way back to Ahrensbach.”

From there, I revealed everything I knew without a care for the time or place. I needed to inform the other children of the former Veronica faction of the dangerous position they were all in and reinforce the impression that I had been impatiently waiting for the archduke candidates to arrive.

The New Children

“Wilma, Lord Hartmut is calling for you.”

“I thank you ever so much for going out of your way for this, Monika. I will go at once.”

Lady Rozemyne had departed for the castle after the new High Priest was appointed. From now until winter socializing began, her guard knights would be taking turns watching the High Bishop’s chambers to ensure that nobody else attempted to steal inside.

All nobles went to the castle for winter socializing and were exceedingly busy there, and the knights were no exception; they would need to leave when socializing season began. However, it seemed that Lord Hartmut, the new High Priest, was going to continue visiting the temple to give instructions to blue priests, summon Lady Rozemyne’s attendants for reports, and so on.

Lord Hartmut’s first Dedication Ritual was fast approaching, and Lady Rozemyne would not be returning from the Royal Academy to help. To accommodate her absence, Lord Hartmut planned to send her letters to keep her abreast with the goings-on of the temple. I truly appreciated his kind and considerate nature.

“Lord Hartmut, it is Wilma,” I said.

“I realize this is sudden, but new children are going to be brought here soon. How ready is the orphanage to take them?”

“The rooms themselves are prepared, but, as per my last report, we are still short on supplies like food, firewood, and bedding. I believe that Fran or Zahm might be able to give you a more thorough rundown of what we lack and what we have in excess.”

Lady Rozemyne had said that we needed only prepare the rooms and that they would bring the necessary supplies at a later date. Lord Hartmut recorded my report on a board that he had on hand.

“Understood. Now, these children are going to be anxious beyond words, having so suddenly lost their families. I imagine it will be a challenge to care for them all, but I trust you to do well,” Lord Hartmut said with a smile. He was Lady Rozemyne’s retainer and an archnoble, but he showed not even a trace of arrogance and was kind to everyone in the orphanage.

Back when Lord Hartmut had first started visiting the temple, he had often visited the orphanage with Lord Justus, the noble who had overseen both the orphanage and the workshop in the High Priest’s

place during Lady Rozemyne's long sleep. Lord Justus was exceedingly easy to speak to and lacked the natural haughtiness of the nobility, so all those in the orphanage and the workshop had come to admire him greatly.

Still, it seemed to me that the children preferred Lord Hartmut. He often told them how Lady Rozemyne was faring in the archduke's castle and the Royal Academy, and they loved his stories so much that they asked him to tell them over and over again. I had started to worry that he would take offense, but he always agreed to their requests, his smile never faltering even for a moment. He was very kind and surely loved children with all his heart.

Everyone in the orphanage had rejoiced when told that Lord Hartmut was being assigned as the new High Priest. Normally, the role was given to a blue priest, so there had been a risk of someone being selected who would treat the gray priests and shrine maidens cruelly. We were grateful to Lady Rozemyne for having offered one of her retainers and grateful to both the archduke and the former High Priest for having let him take up the position despite him not being a blue priest.

"Now, Wilma... are you done with the task I gave you?"

"Almost. I wish that I had finished before the arrival of the children, but the circumstances have left me much too busy. I plan to continue working on it in place of winter handiwork this year."

Lord Hartmut had ordered two illustrations depicting Lady Rozemyne. The first was to have her playing the harspiel in her blue robes, and the second wielding Flutrane's staff as the High Bishop. I could only assume that Lord Hartmut valued both sights dearly, as the instructions he had given me were exceedingly detailed. The task had seemed daunting at first, but the illustrations were slowly but surely meeting my personal standards.

"I am afraid you will grow even busier once the children arrive," Lord Hartmut said. "I, too, will be occupied for some time, so I may have to wait until things calm down to collect them. You wish to be paid in paint, if I recall correctly?"

"Yes, my lord."

Money could not be used in the orphanage, so I was instead requesting what I needed to create more art. As well as the two illustrations of Lady Rozemyne that I was making for Lord Hartmut, I was also making an illustration of the previous High Priest, Lord Ferdinand, playing the harspiel for Lady Elvira. The spring and autumn had proven so wonderfully fulfilling—but also hectic and very challenging.

"Like Konrad, the children coming this winter were living as nobles," Lord Hartmut explained. "Lady Rozemyne wishes for them to

be educated, with those who show promise being returned to noble society—but will the orphanage be able to educate them?”

“We should not face any difficulties teaching them to read, write, do math, and use proper etiquette. Lady Rozemyne seems confident of this as well. Our greatest challenge is going to be teaching music; the orphanage does not have the necessary instruments.”

Rosina had once helped teach the children to play instruments, and my familiarity with music meant that I could also provide some assistance, but there was very little that we could do without the instruments themselves.

“You will not need to worry about that. We will provide you with the instruments from their homes,” Lord Hartmut said with a smile, then indicated that our business was concluded.

I returned to the orphanage with Lothar, an attendant working in the High Priest’s chambers. Lord Hartmut had so considerably instructed him to accompany me to keep any blue priests from getting too close.

“It appears that you really do trust Lord Hartmut, Wilma.”

“Indeed. He is Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, and truly kind. Everyone in the orphanage trusts him as well. We are all so glad to have him as the new High Priest.”

The orphanage had struggled with the news of the four gray priests serving as guards being kidnapped. Lady Rozemyne and her retainers had ended up fighting so hard to save them, but in truth, it would have been entirely normal to leave them to their fates. With that in mind, Lord Hartmut understanding Lady Rozemyne’s determination to protect the orphanage and making considerations to keep us safe proved just what a wonderful person he was.

“How do you feel about Lord Hartmut, Lothar?”

“He prioritizes Lady Rozemyne in all matters and works diligently for her sake, rather than for the sake of the temple. This is fine for now, as Lady Rozemyne is set on supporting the temple, but I must say that his actions and mindset are nothing like those of Lord Ferdinand.”

Lothar was evidently struggling to understand what his lord was thinking and act accordingly. It was common for attendants to have a hard time when assigned to serve someone else, so I imagined that all the attendants of the High Priest’s chambers were feeling the same way.

“During his time here, Lord Ferdinand expertly balanced traditional methods with Lady Rozemyne’s new ones,” Lothar noted. “Lord Hartmut, in contrast, intends to push through only Lady Rozemyne’s methods. I expect the temple will change even more than it has already.”

The ways of the temple had changed dramatically in the few years since Lady Rozemyne had accepted the role of orphanage director and then High Bishop. I couldn't fathom what even greater changes would entail.

"No matter what happens, Lady Rozemyne will not change the temple or orphanage for the worse," I said. "We can be certain of that."

"You really do trust her, Wilma..."

"Indeed. She is the Saint of Ehrenfest, after all."

Lothar chortled. Apparently, Lord Hartmut always said the same thing.

"Delia, Lily—we are soon going to have an influx of new orphans," I said. "I am told they are the children of nobles."

Delia already had experience with infants, having started looking after Dirk when he was still at breastfeeding age, and Lily was the only gray shrine maiden in the temple with experience giving birth, so they had inevitably ended up spending more time with the youngest children than anyone else.

"What could have happened for so many children to be coming to the orphanage at once, I wonder?" Delia said.

Security had increased ever since Brother Egmont allowed a noblewoman into the temple, the gray priests were kidnapped, and Lady Rozemyne was targeted. The orphanage itself was the same as ever, but the atmosphere in the nobles' section of the temple was said to have changed completely. Fran had said that, whenever Lord Hartmut spoke of winter plans, he was always highly concerned with the movements of the blue priests. Lord Hartmut wasn't even allowing their attendants to go near the orphanage.

"Gray priests and shrine maidens cannot refuse orders from blue priests, so in many cases, it is better for us to not know these things. We will also be able to look after the children without any bias if we do not know the reason they ended up here."

We had taken in a noble child—Konrad—once already. He had chosen to leave his home after receiving terrible abuse, so he had adjusted to life in the orphanage without issue—but I wasn't sure whether these other children, who had so abruptly lost their homes, would welcome the new environment so readily. I was a little worried about them.

"In any case, I must finish the illustrations of Lady Rozemyne for Lord Hartmut before we grow busy with the new children," I said. "Please keep an eye on things so that I'm not distracted."

"Understood. Lord Hartmut certainly loves Lady Rozemyne, doesn't he?" Delia replied, sounding exasperated. It was an

understandable opinion to have, considering that he seemed to segue into talking about his lady whenever he came to the orphanage, no matter whom he was speaking to.

Though Delia loves Lady Rozemyne too, I'm sure.

Delia certainly appreciated how much Lady Rozemyne cared about Dirk; she had worn a genuine smile for quite some time after Lady Rozemyne expressed her concerns about Dirk generating too much mana. Delia was quick to deny it, so I decided to hold my tongue and watch her with a warm smile... but Lily showed much less restraint. She gave a mischievous smile and giggled with a hand over her mouth.

“Oh my, Delia... But do you not always join him in his conversations about her? I seem to recall the many, many occasions on which you’ve told him about the time Lady Rozemyne used a shield of Wind to save Dirk.”

“Th-That was just... Aah, geez! Is there anything wrong with that?! As an apprentice gray shrine maiden, I can’t just refuse to answer when he asks me about the moment I found Lady Rozemyne the most beautiful and divine! And it’s not like I can give him any more recent examples, since I’m stuck here in the orphanage!”

Delia had turned bright red.

“Ahaha. You really do throw politeness to the wind when someone points out the truth and you get all flustered. Isn’t it cute, Wilma?”

“No, I don’t!” Delia protested, now becoming teary-eyed.

The very question made me giggle; Delia really was adorable when she was expressing her emotions. I gave Lily a very light scolding for teasing her before heading off to work on my illustrations for Lord Hartmut.

Because I was Lady Rozemyne’s attendant, I had a private room where I kept my art utensils and such. The number of personal belongings I owned had grown considerably. I switched into clothes that I wouldn’t mind getting dirtied, put on an apron, and picked up my brush. Then, after taking a slow breath, I looked down at my illustrations in progress. As an artist, this was the most important part of my day.

I searched the depths of my soul, trying to unravel which colors I should use and how I should use them, delicately applying one layer after another to convey Lady Rozemyne’s beauty as neatly as possible. Trying to figure out how to show the glossiness of her hair, which was as deep and mysterious as the night sky, and how to color her golden, gently smiling eyes was ever so much fun—but at the same time, it required complete seriousness. I felt that it was important to show the contrast between her days as a blue shrine maiden, when her eyes had

been so emotive, and the present. She had grown used to disguising her emotions, so her expressions were now so much more reserved.

Is the distinction clear enough, though...?

I set down my brush, put the two illustrations on an easel so that they were side by side, then stepped back so that I could properly compare them. The one depicting her as the High Bishop exuded a more muted innocence than the other and made her come across as more of a fine young noblewoman, both in her expression and in her posture.

Lady Rozemyne's long slumber meant that it was difficult to gauge her growth, but a closer inspection proved that she had matured so much to protect her family, the orphans, and now Ehrenfest as a whole. According to Monika, who served her much more closely than I, she had started to mature in other ways as well, particularly since the end of summer. The ceremonial robes that Lady Rozemyne had worn during the autumn coming-of-age ceremony apparently now looked noticeably shorter on her. Naturally, it was beneath Leidenschaft's bright rays that children grew the fastest, so Monika was thinking of suggesting that Lady Rozemyne be remeasured next spring so that her clothes could be adjusted.

And she will only continue to grow. I cannot wait to see how beautiful she becomes.

Of course, there was a second reason for me to keep a close eye on Lady Rozemyne's growth—I was certain that Lord Hartmut would order more illustrations from me in the future.

A short time later—not even ten days after winter socializing had started—the attendants of the High Priest's office began bringing children to the orphanage. Lord Hartmut wanted them registered as orphans about as quickly as the knights were arriving with them.

There were children of all ages, from toddlers still struggling to walk, to children as old as Dirk and Konrad. They were wearing rather elegant clothes made to fit them, but this nicety only made their tragic situation that much more apparent. Some were in tears, while others were glaring at us warily—but they were all visibly scared. Four out of every five were clutching beautiful magic tools.

"There are seventeen in total, Wilma. This is the last one," Lord Hartmut said as he brought the last child to be registered. Lothar, Gil, Fritz, and Monika were with him.

The children recoiled in fear upon seeing Lord Hartmut, but he simply regarded them with his usual bright smile and said, "From today onward, this place is your home. Being in the orphanage means that you are no longer nobles, and your lives will change drastically as a result. Be grateful to Lady Rozemyne, for her compassionate heart is

the very reason you were given this opportunity.”

Lord Hartmut went on to introduce those of us who would be looking after the children in the orphanage, then called over Dirk and Konrad. Before speaking to them, he crouched down such that he was on their level. He always did this with the orphans; it was one of his many good points.

“Dirk, Konrad—the children here have all just lost their families,” Lord Hartmut explained. “I want you to teach them how things work here in the orphanage. Lady Rozemyne has resolved to save them, and your task is to help with that.”

Dirk and Konrad responded with firm nods. “Lady Rozemyne already saved us. We want them to be saved too.”

“You’re both such good kids,” Lord Hartmut said, mussing their hair with a gentle smile. “They’re feeling scared right now, but I want you to teach them the vastness of Lady Rozemyne’s compassion—and just how much they owe their lives to her.”

“Right!”

Lord Hartmut turned back to the new orphans. “Everyone, Konrad was once a noble as well. In that sense, he is the same as you. He understands the differences between living here and in the Noble’s Quarter better than anyone. You can ask him any questions you may have. I will return during the Dedication Ritual to see how you are all doing.”

From there, the gray priests were instructed to help move the luggage. Fritz and Gil gathered together those who were used to doing manual labor in the workshop and started at once. Meanwhile, the knights were going to be bringing in furniture and such for the children.

“If we had Lady Rozemyne’s highbeast, then we could have moved all this in one fell swoop,” Lord Hartmut remarked. “Instead, we must resort to using wagons. My lady truly does create one splendid thing after another.”

After extolling the virtues of Lady Rozemyne’s highbeast, Lord Hartmut left the orphanage with Lothar. Gil and the others returned not long after with the first pieces of luggage. We would need to divide the work between the gray priests and the children, using the contents of the boxes to begin setting up the new orphans’ rooms. For now, however, Lily and I embraced the young children who were crying for their families.

“Now, now,” Delia said. “There is no time to cry—we are preparing spaces for you to sleep. Please set them up yourselves.” She directed the children while Dirk moved to demonstrate.

“We can start with this mattress. Someone take the other side.”

“You can leave your magic tools here for now. You won’t be able

to eat while holding them,” Konrad told the children. He was best suited to guide them, since he knew what noble life was like, but they showed no signs of moving—some even tightened their grips on their magic tools. Konrad sighed, looking especially troubled, and added, “As Lord Hartmut said, we are no longer nobles. You are going to be living here, so you need to learn to follow our rules.”

The children stared at Konrad with wide eyes. One girl in particular looked positively incensed. I moved to shield Konrad from her glare, then knelt down so that I was eye to eye with her.

“I am aware that nobles do not think highly of the temple,” I said, “and it is only natural that you would feel uneasy about living here. However, there is no avoiding that you must adapt to how we do things. All we can do is help you.”

The girl glared at me as well, radiating the dignity of a noble despite being so young. Her face then twisted in anger, as if she had at last found an opportunity to vent her frustrations. “You will ‘help’ us? What, do you mean to say that you will assist us in returning to noble society? Do not lie to us...”

“Oh, but that is precisely what I mean. Such is the job that has been given to me.”

My response caught the girl off guard. She stared at me for a moment and then muttered, “What...?”

“Oh my. Has Lord Hartmut not mentioned this? Lady Rozemyne intends for you all to be taught to read, write, do math, demonstrate etiquette, and play the harspiel at least at the level expected of a mednoble. Furthermore, I have been told that the most promising of you will be baptized as nobles, with the archduke himself as your guardian.”

The older children’s eyes flashed with ambition. I could only assume that the most enthusiastic among them were already close to reaching their baptisms. It was better to have an objective to work toward than wallow in sadness, even if that objective was simply to leave the orphanage.

“It is up to all of you to work hard,” I said with a smile. “Lady Rozemyne and Lord Hartmut will of course be receiving reports on your progress.”

A child standing behind the wide-eyed girl suddenly looked up, brimming with determination, and placed his magic tool where Konrad had indicated. “I’m going to get this education and go back to noble society,” he declared.

The boy then grabbed the opposite end of the mattress that Dirk was holding. The others had been too daunted to act, but now that somebody else had made the first move, they gradually began to follow suit. Only the youngest children remained frozen to the spot,

unsure what to do.

“Let’s play once we finish getting the mattresses in place,” Dirk said to the boy who had moved to help him, his voice bright. “We have karuta, playing cards, and a lot of books.”

The boy merely pursed his lips in response; he wasn’t quite ready to open up to the idea.

Dirk laughed, unfazed. “I haven’t even lost to Konrad yet,” he continued. “If you can’t beat me, then you’ll never get to be a noble again.”

“I... practiced with my older brother. I would not lose to you.”

“We’ll see about that. I’m Dirk. You?”

“Bertram. I will ensure that my talents are recognized as the best of all those here and return to noble society as soon as I can.”

The older children who had decided to play along in the hope of returning to noble society began mimicking Dirk and Konrad, and their time in the orphanage started to progress smoothly. There were quite a few surprises, of course, but they did their best to assist us with work and took their studies very seriously. Our limited resources meant that the children had to share instruments during harspiel lessons, but they worked their hardest all the same, since they needed to know how to play for their debuts.

Dirk and Konrad were in turn being influenced positively by the new children, who had such clear goals in mind. They had started practicing music despite not having been very interested in it before, made friends to play karuta and playing cards with, and were now cycling through victories and defeats. Konrad had finally experienced winning after so many losses against Dirk, and it was clear how much this was motivating him.

According to Delia, who was looking after the oldest of the new orphans, there were still nights when some of the children cried quietly into their pillows. She hadn’t been able to speak to them about it—whenever she would go over to check on them, they would pretend to be asleep—so she had settled on just carefully watching over them the next day.

The oldest children had it best, since their baptisms were so close. Meanwhile, the youngest were still crying for their families almost each and every day. Lily and I did our best to embrace and comfort them all, but we didn’t have enough hands between us. In truth, I was a little sleep-deprived... and no sooner had that thought crossed my mind than Lord Hartmut appeared. He had with him six gray shrine maidens and five gray priests—the attendants of blue priests who had apparently been arrested along with their families.

“The blue priests were not involved in any crimes themselves, but they cannot live as blue priests without support from their families,

and we needed to bring them in for questioning either way,” Lord Hartmut explained. “Of course, we gave any attendants who wished to be arrested with their lord the opportunity to go to the castle, but nobody expressed an interest, so we have brought them back to the orphanage instead. Their food will arrive from the rooms of the blue priests later on.” He then gave Lily and me a small grin and said, “The number of children has grown considerably. You will need as many helpers as you can get, no?”

That’s... exactly right.

Lord Hartmut’s profound kindness washed over me. I expressed my gratitude, then went to my room to fetch the illustrations of Lady Rozemyne.

“Lord Hartmut, here are the pictures you ordered. How are they?” I asked upon my return, spreading them out on a table in the dining hall.

Lord Hartmut peered at the illustrations. His orange eyes suddenly began to sparkle, and a sigh of awe passed his lips. “Absolutely splendid. It is clear to see how much her divinity has increased since her days as a shrine maiden,” he said, confirming that they met his expectations. It was such a relief to know that even the harshest judge of all was pleased.

“Please let me see, Lord Hartmut,” Konrad said, excited. “They’re of Lady Rozemyne, right? Wilma draws in her room, so I haven’t been able to look at them yet.”

Hartmut thought for a moment, then said, “You may look, but only if you stand back and vow not to touch them under any circumstances.”

Dirk and Konrad agreed, and soon enough, they were showering my illustrations with praise. This must have drawn the attention of the other children, as they all came over to look as well—albeit from the agreed-upon distance.

“The kids who have just joined us have presumably not had the chance to see Lady Rozemyne. This is an excellent opportunity,” Lord Hartmut said. “These illustrations depict the Saint of Ehrenfest, who is beloved by Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom and reflects the purity of Flutrane the Goddess of Water. Her hair sparkles like the night sky, as if draped in the God of Darkness’s cape, and her golden eyes sparkle as though containing the Goddess of Light herself.”

The new orphans listened with their mouths agape. Lord Hartmut’s speech had become so poetic toward the end that I could imagine the younger ones had struggled to understand him.

“Of course, Lady Rozemyne’s wondrousness does not end with her beauty,” Lord Hartmut continued. “Her deeply compassionate heart is nothing short of divine, and she has the exceedingly rare qualities of a

true saint. Or, at least, that is what I used to believe, but something occurred quite recently that has forced me to reconsider. Perhaps she is not a saint but a genuine *goddess*.”

“The Goddess of Mercy?” Dirk replied without missing a beat.

“She *did* save the gray priests, so she surely is a goddess,” Konrad noted.

The other children were completely lost—but Lord Hartmut was now invested in his preaching and wouldn’t allow something as small as the confusion of others to stop him.

“It was on the day that Lord Ferdinand left for Ahrensbach. She cast a rainbow blessing upon our three departing associates. Do you understand now? Do you realize how special it is to pray to all of the gods, and earn blessings from them all in turn?”

“I don’t really understand...”

“Very well. Then I shall explain.”

And so, Lord Hartmut began a gleeful explanation of magecraft. He spoke at great length, but to summarize: Ewigeliebe was on bad terms with all of the gods except Geduldh, so forming a prayer with them all was very difficult indeed.

And yet Lady Rozemyne had accomplished it with relative ease.

“Lady Rozemyne’s incandescent eyes sparkled with a divine rainbow, as if all the gods were contained within them. Then, with her schtappe in hand, she drew in the air a magic circle that none had seen before. Light followed the twists and turns of her schtappe until the circle was complete, and from her beautiful lips, a blessing was woven. The circle shone with the divine color of each god as their names were called, and we were all struck by the sheer beauty of the sight. It was akin to witnessing all of the gods gather in one place. Light of various colors spilled from the edges of the circle until, at last, a rainbow blessing flew out. All those gathered watched in awed silence, while Lady Rozemyne quietly smiled. What humbleness! What superiority! It was more divine than anything. And at that moment, I wished to pray to Lady Rozemyne herself.”

In the end, Lord Hartmut sang Lady Rozemyne’s praises for an entire bell. When he eventually finished, he exhaled in satisfaction and then looked across all those gathered in the orphanage.

“Now then, everyone—let us offer our prayers to the mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, the mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, Flutrane the Goddess of Water, Leidenschaft the God of Fire, Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind, Geduldh the Goddess of Earth, Ewigeliebe the God of Life, and finally Lady Rozemyne, the Saint of Ehrenfest.”

Everyone shot up their arms and raised their left knee into the air—that is, everyone except the new orphans. They recoiled at the

sudden movement and started looking around. We had been so busy with handiwork and studying that they had not yet been taught how to pray.

I will need to teach them before we begin our daily studies.

My intention was to do all that I could to help the new orphans adjust to the temple's ways as soon as possible.

Winter Resolution

“C’mon, Kamil. Hurry!” Dad shouted as he ran down the stairs.

“You’re telling *me* to hurry?!” I shouted back, running after him with everything we needed clutched to my chest. “We’re late because *you* wouldn’t get out of bed!”

It was a sunny day, and that meant one thing: parues. We had meant to leave to gather some earlier, but it had taken Mom and me ages to get Dad to properly wake up.

“We’re outta time. Kamil, get on the sled.”

“But Dad...”

“Quick! Won’t be any parues left at this rate!”

There was no point arguing with him. I gave up and climbed onto the sled, which Dad then pulled along as he started running. I gripped the edges so that I wouldn’t fall off, and puffed out my cheeks.

This sucks. I’m totally old enough to run now.

I was well aware that this was our best option—we were late, and there was no chance of me keeping up with Dad all the way to the forest—but still. I wanted to get off the sled before my friends spotted me; everyone would laugh if they saw me getting pulled along with all the stuff.

Bet they’ll think I’m a baby who can’t fend for himself. But it was Dad who overslept, not me!

“Gunther!” came a voice when we reached the gate. “Gatherin’ parues when you’re this busy? Must be rough.”

“Can say that again,” Dad replied. “Anything happen that I should know about?”

Dad was talking to a guard. We needed to hurry if we wanted to get any parues, but I stayed silent and just watched them; Dad had told me before not to interrupt his conversations at the gate, since they were to do with his work.

“There were a lot of new faces in the orphanage group that came by. Lutz and Gil were there, so I let ’em all through, but... do you know anything about all this, Gunther?”

“Probably some top secret archduke business. I’ll ask if we cross ’em in the forest.”

It was normal for Dad to be busy during the winter—there was always snow to shovel and drunks to deal with—but this year he had even more on his plate than usual. The north gate had received some

special jobs from the archduke himself.

If the orphans are here, does that mean Dirk and Konrad are gonna be in the forest too? I can't wait to see them.

During autumn last year, when I'd gone to the forest with Lutz for the first time, I'd ended up meeting Dirk and Konrad. They were both orphans and were about my age, and they understood me no matter what we spoke about. The orphanage where they lived also had all the toys and picture books made by the Rozemyne Workshop. Lutz had said that I couldn't discuss these toys—not even my favorites—with any of the neighbors, so I was real glad to finally have another chance to rave about them.

I'd once had another older sister, Myne, but she'd died a long time ago. Nobles and the temple had apparently been involved, and my parents had told me that the High Bishop was giving me toys from her workshop out of sympathy. It was a nice gesture, but we were still wary about having any kind of contact with nobles, so I wasn't allowed to talk about them or the toys.

I couldn't remember the first time I'd found out about Myne. But one thing I remembered clear as day was Mom, Lutz, and Tuuli happily talking about her, saying "Myne" this and "Myne" that. They'd stopped the moment I asked who this "Myne" person was—and that was when I'd realized that she was someone I wasn't allowed to talk about. I'd already promised Dad that I would keep my mouth shut, so I didn't plan on bringing her up again.

Back when I'd first gone to the forest with Lutz, I'd been told that I could talk about toys with the orphanage kids, but not about Myne. That was all well and good, but what could I have even said about her? I'd never actually known my other sister.

The next time I'd seen Dirk and Konrad in the forest, I'd made sure to bring karuta cards with me. Dirk had sometimes beat me, but I'd always won against Konrad. That had all changed when spring came around, though. Konrad suddenly became a much better player, and winning against him became way harder. Frustrated, I'd started practicing with Mom a lot more often, and sometimes with Tuuli when she came home.

"Dirk! Konrad!"

We arrived at the forest and saw the orphans all gathering together. It was just as the guard had said—there were a lot of unfamiliar kids among them. It must have been their first time looking for parues, as Lutz and Gil were teaching them how to go about gathering them.

"Lutz! Gil!" Dad called. "Want to gather together? You're gonna be offering what you find to Lady Rozemyne, right?"

Lutz frowned a little and said, "Well, I dunno if she's coming back

this year..." Lady Rozemyne usually returned to the temple midway through winter, but it seemed that wouldn't be the case this year.

"Actually, we're gonna be putting any parues we find in the ice room," Gil added with a grin. "Lady Rozemyne always looks forward to 'em, so we want to keep as many as we can."

It also turned out that Lady Rozemyne loved parues enough to get excited about eating them every year. There was a place in the temple that was basically winter all year round, and parues kept there wouldn't rot even in spring.

The temple sure has some weird places.

"Kamil, you can go gather parues with the orphanage children," Dad said. "I need to speak with Gil."

"Got it."

Dad and Gil went off somewhere. It was probably to do with work again. Meanwhile, Lutz and I went over to the orphanage children. Dirk and Konrad were teaching the new faces how to gather parues.

"And that's why we take turns getting the fruit," Dirk concluded.

"Must I really dirty my hands...?"

"Aw, shut it, Bertram! How many times have I told you? Those who don't work don't eat!"

The new kids all seemed strangely cocky. Some were lounging about, not even pretending to listen to Dirk's advice.

Can't he just exclude anyone who doesn't wanna pay attention?

"Things look pretty rough..." I noted.

"Oh, Kamil. Been a while," Konrad said when he noticed me.

"Things have been way busier, what with us getting so many new kids at once. Seems like Dirk and Delia are always mad about something or another back in the orphanage. I wish you could see it; they shout in the same way and everything."

In the past, Dirk and Konrad had complained about having nobody to play with, since there were so few young kids in the orphanage. But now they had more than they knew what to do with. There were maybe ten kids in total—and, according to Konrad, there were some even younger ones still at the orphanage.

Where'd they all come from...?

"I wish we could play karuta here in the snow," Konrad said.

"We've all been practicing together, so you're going down the next time we play."

He was surprisingly confident for someone who normally lost and then sat around pouting. I actually started to worry. Of course he and Dirk were getting better when they had this many people to practice with.

"I'm getting better too," I said. "Even beat Renate the other day."

"Renate?"

“A girl from the Gilberta Company.”

Before I could say anything else, Dirk and Lutz called out to us. “Hey, Konrad! Kamil! Can you help us show these kids the ropes?”

I didn’t waste a moment before making my way over. First, I’d need to demonstrate how to climb a parue tree.

It had been just before winter when I first met Renate. Tuuli had taken me to the Gilberta Company—and as it had been my first time going to the north part of the city, I’d worn some clean clothes she’d made for me that looked a lot like the ones worn for baptisms. The buildings there were way more colorful than the ones where we lived.

“They’re so pretty, aren’t they? The old paint was washed off when the archduke cleaned the whole city at once, so the buildings had to be repainted,” Tuuli explained. She then giggled to herself and added, “Remember when Mr. Deid was grumbling about how much work there was to do?”

The archduke’s magic had cleaned all the wooden walls in the city and turned our roads and the stone parts of our buildings a sparkly white. This had actually been pretty bad for the rich because it had stripped the paint from their establishments along with all the grime.

“I heard that things were especially tense when they had to prepare for the merchants of other duchies showing up. I’m sure Dad was always having to patrol the area.”

I couldn’t really remember how the city had looked before, but everyone always spoke about the change being so dramatic. One thing that *had* stuck with me, though, was something that Dad had said when patrolling with the other soldiers: “The archduke was planning to shoo us all out and remake the city from scratch, but Lady Rozemyne stopped him. Now, we’ve gotta make sure it stays clean.”

“This is the Gilberta Company, where I work,” Tuuli said when we arrived. “Be sure to speak politely from here on out.”

We took the stairs on the side of the building up to the second floor, then Tuuli announced that we were here. She spoke and acted so, so differently from when she was at home. I straightened my back—just like she and Lutz had taught me—as a servant let us inside.

“So you’re Kamil, huh?” the boss of the Gilberta Company asked. “Welcome.”

He went on to introduce me to his family. There was Mrs. Corinna, Lady Rozemyne’s seamstress who Tuuli respected so much, and their children, Renate and Knut. There was also Mark and the boss of the Plantin Company, who were here today by coincidence to help with teaching Renate.

I was told to play cards and karuta with the other kids; Mark and the boss of the Plantin Company even joined us. Knut was so young

that he wasn't even a challenge, but I lost about half of my games against Renate.

"Told you, didn't I?" the boss of the Plantin Company said with a grin. "I'm not winning 'cause I'm an adult—you're losing 'cause you're not good enough."

Renate puffed out her cheeks and looked at me. "Join the Gilberta Company, Kamil. We can keep playing until my win rate is one hundred percent. How does that sound to you?"

"Uh..."

I didn't know how to respond. But as I sat there, at a loss for words, Mr. Otto joined in with a smile. "Good thinking, Renate. That's my daughter for you. Kamil, how about you come work for us as a lehangé?"

Surprised that the boss himself was inviting me, I glanced over at Tuuli. She worked as Lady Rozemyne's hairpin maker here at the Gilberta Company, and she was even being trusted to design outfits and pick out cloth for her. Her status had shot through the roof as a result; where we lived, someone becoming this successful before coming of age was pretty much unheard of. Everyone looked up to her, and I was lucky to have her as a big sister.

I wonder... Would joining the Gilberta Company help me become amazing like Tuuli?

I was kinda tempted. Dad was inviting me to join the soldiers and help him protect the city, but working with Tuuli sounded a lot more fun.

Before I could even try to respond, however, the boss of the Plantin Company shot out a hand. "No. Kamil would do a lot better working for the Plantin Company. You're more interested in books and toys than hairpins, cloth, and rinsham, right?"

Just like that, my heart turned to the Plantin Company. Lutz was, like, the only other person as successful as Tuuli where we lived. He had become a leherl at a major store despite being born into a family of woodworkers, which made him just as incredible.

I really loved the toys and picture books that Lutz brought me. I cared a lot more about them than hairpins or cloth, that was for sure. Those kinds of things were for girls.

"I've heard from Lutz that you want to start getting involved in the orphanage workshop and going to a bunch of places, right?" the boss of the Plantin Company continued.

I only really wanted to go to the workshop because Dirk and Konrad were there, but the idea of learning how the toys and picture books were made was pretty appealing. Thinking about it like that, the Plantin Company seemed way better. Lutz had said that they got to read the finished books before anyone else too. That sounded great.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” the boss of the Gilberta Company cried out. “How come you’re always trying to steal away the gems I find, Benno?! Wasn’t Lutz enough?!”

“As if you need anyone but Tuuli! We’ve gotta put people where they’re gonna do best!”

I was trying to decide what to do, but the two bosses had ended up in a full-on argument. Renate was telling me to hurry up and decide already; apparently, they wouldn’t stop fighting until I made up my mind.

Unsure what to do, I turned to Tuuli for help. She came over with a gentle smile and gave me a pat on the head. “Don’t worry, Kamil. You have plenty of time to think it over before your baptism,” she assured me. “The profession you choose will shape your whole life, so you need to figure out what you want to do yourself. Taking inspiration from others is fine, but you can’t make excuses like saying that you only made your choice because someone else told you to. You’ll only end up full of regrets, and you won’t be able to work your hardest when you’re blaming other people.”

Tuuli then looked over at the two bosses, still wearing her warm smile, and said, “In other words, you two—please let Kamil decide for himself. Don’t rush him.”

“Ahaha. That must have been rough. They’re both so stubborn,” Lutz said, having been warming his parue-chilled hands by the fire while listening to my story. He was always there to pat my head and cheer me on, and it made me wish that I had a big brother like him.

“Lutz... are you, uh... going to marry Tuuli?” I asked. “She’s about to come of age, isn’t she? Feels like everyone’s getting real excited about that.”

Most girls started looking for husbands and preparing for marriage when they were about to come of age—and it made sense that Tuuli would pick Lutz, what with how often they hung out. Even our families agreed that they would make a lovely couple, which was another good sign, since family connections had a big impact on marriages. There was also the fact that, even with all their success, it was unlikely that either of them had the money to marry someone else from a major store.

“Well, I get that everyone’s excited, and us ending up together is the safest option... but who knows? Might not happen for a long time. Tuuli had her heart broken, you know.”

“What?!”

“Oops... That’s supposed to be a secret.”

“Come on, Lutz! You’ve gotta tell me now! Who was it?! I mean, Tuuli’s so good at sewing and works so hard and...”

There wasn't a boy alive who wouldn't find themselves staring at Tuuli, so how could anyone have turned her down? I was probably a little biased, but I also genuinely believed that. Maybe it had to do with her social standing and our family or something, since our parents talked about that a lot.

In the end, Lutz refused to tell me any more, no matter how many times I asked. "I wanna talk about you, not Tuuli," he said with a grin. "You've made your decision, right? I can see it on your face."

I grinned back at him. "I want to work with the Plantin Company. I'd prefer working with books and toys over protecting the city or selling hairpins."

"Ah, Myne... You sure raised him into a bookworm, huh?"

Lutz mumbled something too quietly for me to hear. I asked him to repeat himself, but he just shook his head. He had way more secrets than I'd ever expected.

"If you really want to join the Plantin Company, then you should go ask Mr. Gunther and the others for permission to study there," Lutz said. "This is a good time as well, since the blizzards are calming down now."

"Study?"

"I had a hard time becoming a merchant as the son of a carpenter, and now you're gonna have a hard time as the son of a soldier. We'll let you stay at the Plantin Company for about ten days and give you all the training that you'll need."

I could already read and do math thanks to my toys and picture books, but it turned out there was a lot more I needed to know about the mindset of a merchant and the way their world worked. Taking Lutz's advice was definitely my best option, since he had already gone down this path himself.

"I'll speak with Mark and Master Benno," Lutz said, "but I'm pretty sure they'll take you in a heartbeat."

"Really?!"

Lutz grinned and nodded. "The store gets busier in the spring, and next year's going to be even rougher than usual with our upcoming trip to Kirnberger. I've got more free time in the winter, though. I'm underage and can't go to the castle yet, so yeah."

At the end of winter, Master Benno and the leherls had their hands full going to the castle—but Lutz was done as soon as he finished preparing the books and study materials from the Rozemyne Workshop.

"You'll need to work on your language, posture, and etiquette," Lutz continued, listing all the areas I'd need to receive training in. "But first and foremost, be sure to get permission from your mom and dad. Life's hard when you don't have your parents' support."

He seemed to be speaking from experience, but I wasn't worried. Mom and Dad would definitely understand. It was like the doorway to my future was suddenly wide open, and that realization made me so thrilled.

"Lutz, I'm going to do my best."

"Yep. Have at it."

There was a quiet *thwump* as a parue landed in the snow nearby. The new kids were getting the fruit off the trees way, way faster than Lutz and I could. The same was true for Dirk and Konrad.

"How come it looks so easy for them?" I asked.

"Who knows? Oh, look. Mr. Gunther's waving. Looks like you're up, Kamil."

"Right!"

I climbed the parue tree to switch places with Dad. "We're almost done, Kamil. You take care of the rest," he said as he passed me on his way down.

I took off my gloves and grabbed the first parue by its stem, trying to warm it up. Dirk looked over from a nearby branch while I was waiting and said, "You seem in a good mood, Kamil. Aren't your hands freezing?"

"They are, but... Dirk, when spring comes, I might get to go to the orphanage to see the Rozemyne Workshop. Lutz said that Lady Rozemyne will give me her permission if I join the Plantin Company."

"Really?! I can't wait!" Dirk exclaimed, smiling in excitement. The thought of one day getting to work with him and Konrad sounded amazing.

Light started to stream in through the branches above us, marking the end of our gathering. The parues began shining like jewels, and the trees waved back and forth like they'd suddenly come to life, making loud rustling sounds.

I climbed down at once and watched as the parue trees started to disappear. The new kids seeing it for the first time were in complete shock. The trees stretched up, up into the air, then swooped down and vanished entirely.

It was time for everyone to return home, so we put our basket of parues on our sled and started making our way back. Dad wanted to make sure the orphanage kids got back safely, so we accompanied them as far as the gate. Getting back into the city was harder than leaving it, and since the noon guard wouldn't be the same person who had seen Lutz and the others out, the new orphans probably would have been denied entry. Dad was going to speak to whoever was on duty to make sure they were allowed through.

"Things are a bit tense right now, so the guards wouldn't have let

you all through just because they recognize you and Gil,” Dad explained to Lutz. “Make sure you come to me before doing this again. They’ll trust me more.”

“Thanks, Mr. Gunther.”

Just as he’d promised, Dad spoke to the guards and got all the orphanage kids into the city without issue. We passed through the gate, and the orphans headed back to the orphanage.

On our way home, right before we turned a corner, Dad gave a parue to Gil. “Get this to Lady Rozemyne,” he said.

“I’ll store it in the ice room and make sure she gets it.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Nooo... My parue...

They were so hard to gather, but Dad always gave one to the orphanage for Lady Rozemyne. It was weird—Dirk, Konrad, and everyone in my family seemed to love Lady Rozemyne way too much, even if she did employ a lot of us.

That night, after dinner, I told my parents that there was something on my mind. They exchanged anxious looks in response, then Mom started pouring tea. Dad moved about in his seat a little, took a sip from the cup that was set on the table for him, then gave me his full attention.

“What is it?” he asked, his voice several times lower than usual.

I was worried they would refuse, but I clenched my fists and looked at them head-on. “Mom. Dad. I want to make books with Lutz!” I announced. “I want to work at the Plantin Company and spread new books everywhere!”



All of a sudden, Mom and Dad got all teary-eyed. I couldn't understand why. I'd expected them to refuse, or Dad to question me about why I didn't want to be a soldier.

"Do you not want me to...?" I asked, tilting my head at them.

"No, no," Mom said, wiping her eyes. She stood up, came to my side, and began stroking my head with a conflicted expression. "If making books is what you want to do, then I won't try to stop you. I'm on your side. Just do your best."

Dad nodded in agreement. In other words, I now had permission to study at the Plantin Company.

I'm gonna make books! I'm gonna grow up to be just like Lutz!

My Son's Departure

“Mother, this is Justus. I have urgent news and must ask you to return home to the estate today.”

An ordonnanz had arrived for me while I was in the castle, sorting through gifts with Lady Elvira and Lady Florencia. I was surprised for a moment, but they both seemed far more disturbed.

“Oh my. Urgent news... What could it possibly be?” Lady Elvira said.

“Rihyarda, Rozemyne has not yet returned from the temple,” Lady Florencia added. “I ask that you go home at once. You may have tomorrow off as well.”

I understood their extreme concern—Justus rarely sent such ordonnanzes while I was busy with work—but Lord Ferdinand had personally asked me to evaluate the gifts being sent to Ahrensbach. I could not simply abandon this duty.

“I shall graciously accept your offer and return home for today, but I will return to continue this work tomorrow,” I said. “This is Justus we are talking about; I cannot imagine it is anything significant.”

“That will not do, Rihyarda,” Lady Elvira said, a sudden sharpness to her eyes. “I order you thus as the mother of your lady, Rozemyne: treasure the time you have left with Lord Justus. You do not know how much longer you will be able to help him as his mother.”

It was rare for her to look quite so emotional, and the look she was giving me pierced my heart. Lady Elvira was also sending her son to Ahrensbach; and due to the sudden change in plans, we only had a week left with Lord Ferdinand and our children.

“Rihyarda,” Lady Florencia said, “as these are gifts from one duchy to another, this work should most properly be carried out by members of the archducal family, such as myself and Charlotte. Unfortunately, Lord Ferdinand did not request my aid directly, but I would suggest not giving that fact undue importance. Go and assist Justus.”

Even then, I was hesitant to abandon the duty given to me. I had spent my entire life thus far devoted to my work.

Having sensed my conflicting emotions, Lady Florencia gave me a gentle smile. “Would it not be problematic if this matter of Justus’s went unresolved and Lord Ferdinand’s schedule were to be interrupted

as a result? Rihyarda, Elvira—you should *both* take tomorrow off. You may assist your sons with their luggage, clean their rooms, or what have you, as long as you make sure to spend some time with them as their mothers before they leave. This is an order. Is that understood?”

Indeed, her expression seemed warm at first glance, but her indigo eyes carried a strength that one could not refuse. And when considered alongside the fact that I could not refuse an order from the archducal family, my hands were well and truly tied. Both Lady Elvira and I knelt before her.

“We are grateful.”

We often saw and worked with our children as retainers, but we seldom had the opportunity to meet with them as parents. Today would perhaps be the last time we ever met with our sons as family.

“My apologies, Mother. I seem to have come back late,” Justus said when he arrived at home, wearing a smirk that indicated there was no danger at all. Lady Elvira and Lady Florencia’s concern had filled me with such unease, yet here he was grinning up a storm.

I sighed, then raised my eyebrows at him. “We may be family, Justus, but as two working adults, this was far too sudden! And at fourth bell, no less! How many times have I told you to contact me at third bell, at the very latest? Any later than that does not leave me with enough time to prepare a meal.”

“Milady’s away at the temple for handover business, and, unlike last year, there’s no embroidering to be done. Were you not entirely without work?”

“I was sorting through the gifts for Ahrensbach, as per an order from Lord Ferdinand. And, in any case, whether or not I have free time does *not* excuse your rudeness. Do not put such a burden on our attendants and chefs.”

We would normally eat dinner at our place of work, so a sudden change of plans only served to inconvenience those working at our estate. As an attendant, Justus knew that it was our duty to create a reasonable work environment for our staff. Why, then, was he so incapable of managing that...?

Justus gave me a curious look. “Mother, it amazes me that you can talk for so long. How do you say so much in a single breath?”

My fool of a son!

I was feeling a mixture of resignation that he would never change and outrage that he had yet to learn his lesson, but the most I could do was put my head in my hands. Was it just me, or had he not grown at all since his youth?

Paying no mind to the fact that he had just given his own mother a headache, Justus handed me a sound-blocking magic tool and said,

“Tell your attendant to leave; what comes next is secret.” He then turned on his heel and started toward his room. “How are things in the castle? I expect our sudden departure has been causing some chaos.”

“Indeed. We have an entire season less to dedicate to the handover. Lord Sylvester and the higher-ups of the Knight’s Order are all in quite the panic,” I replied. Many winter plans were being impacted by this sudden change of schedule. “How is milady doing in the temple? Otilie has informed me that Hartmut is tremendously busy...”

“Milady is uneasy about losing her guardian but is staying strong nonetheless. She is preparing meals for him to bring to Ahrensbach, a hairpin to be gifted to Lady Letizia... It seems as if she is keeping busy as a way of avoiding her sorrows. I am worried about how she will fare once Lord Ferdinand is gone.”

We soon reached Justus’s room and closed the door behind us. I then turned to him and said, “So, what is this urgent business that has taken me away from my work?”

“Naturally, I wish to borrow the skills of my excellent attendant mother. Do help your adorable son with his packing. There’s a lot I’m bringing with me that I don’t want our estate’s attendants to see.”

Calling oneself adorable was anything but, though I did understand that Justus needed some assistance. His report a moment ago implied that he had a mountain of work to be done before his departure: checking the food and sweets that milady prepared, cleaning up the High Priest’s chambers, assisting Lasfam in Lord Ferdinand’s estate, and passing on his duties in the castle. He surely had no time to spare on his own preparations and chambers.

“Not to mention, once the High Priest’s chambers have been cleared out and Lord Ferdinand’s luggage has been brought to his estate, Lady Rozemyne will be staying at the castle in preparation for winter,” Justus continued. “As her head attendant, you will not be able to come here for the duration of her stay, no? Hence my urgent summons.”

It seemed that his schedule was even more packed than I realized.

“I do not know how to feel about using a member of the archducal family to transport luggage... but I understand the circumstances,” I mused. “That said, doing all of your packing between now and seventh bell is nigh impossible. You are lucky that Lady Florencia has given me some time off.”

“That’s good to hear. I was planning to use some more forceful methods to free up your schedule otherwise.”

“Justus! Do you really not understand how much sudden changes inconvenience others?”

“I do—but right now, it’s hard to determine who can know how much in the castle.”

It was impossible to argue against that. Because I was Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, I was privy to information known only by Ehrenfest’s topmost echelons—but such matters weren’t for the ears of our estate’s attendants.

“I can help you to pack,” I said, “but I refuse to sort through your mountain of clutter.”

“Yes, I’m aware. I couldn’t leave that to you anyway, Mother, as you’d toss it all away. Even though each piece is a treasure to me...”

At a young age, Justus had developed a habit of gathering strange items that could only be described as junk and nothing more. To make matters worse, he refused to throw any of these “treasures” away—a stubbornness that had caused the attendant who cleaned his room and me countless headaches. I recalled the rules we had enforced as a compromise of sorts: keep it all in your hidden room, and do not complain if anything found carelessly strewn across your floor is immediately discarded. Only then had his room started to look more befitting of a noble.

“I will need to have winter clothes and daily necessities packed within the next few days,” Justus said. “Can I leave that to you, Mother? I plan to unregister my hidden room, so I need to box up everything inside and put it in a corner somewhere.”

Unregistering one’s hidden room indicated one’s resolve to never return there again. My daughter had done the same when leaving our estate after her marriage. I had felt the same sense of loss back then too.

“Don’t tell me you intend to bring everything from your hidden room to Ahrensbach...” I said.

“Of course. Once things... *settle down* over there, of course. I trust you to look after my things until then.”

That was his roundabout way of saying that he didn’t know how bad things were going to be. There was a sudden burning sensation in my throat, and my stomach started to turn.

I watched Justus as he disappeared into his hidden room with some empty boxes, then I started packing clothes and small items from around his desk. He needed only the bare minimum to get through the winter, not unlike milady’s preparations for the Royal Academy. Anything he needed for spring and beyond would be sent over once the snow melted.

“But this isn’t the same as preparing for the Royal Academy,” I said to myself. “He will need to attend winter socializing events, which means he will need to bring more clothing.”

I put aside a few days’ worth of normal clothes and something for

him to wear on the day of his departure, then began packing one winter outfit after another. I then started filling boxes with the items he was unlikely to use on a daily basis. Stationery like his writing utensils and such would naturally need to be placed on top, since he was bound to need it more often. It was precisely because he didn't want the estate attendants to touch his documents and such that he had asked me to help out.

Maintaining secrecy is especially crucial now, while we must be so careful about our intelligence leaking.

The recent temple break-in and theft of our duchy's bible was still fresh in our minds. It had turned out to be Viscountess Dahldolf who perpetrated the crime, but the Ehrenfest higher-ups all suspected that Lady Georgine had masterminded it all. It was also believed that Lord Ferdinand interfering with her plans had put her in a situation where she had no choice but to have him summoned to Ahrensbach as soon as possible.

Why, oh why did things have to turn out this way?

I could not help but remember the days when I had served a young Lady Georgine, and the way she had played with my Gudrun and Justus. Her mother had given birth to two girls consecutively, which had put her future as the first wife in danger and caused so much worry. It was then that Lady Georgine had vowed to become the next archduchess for her mother's sake. Even now, I considered it a respectable and very purehearted decision.

But then, Lady Veronica birthed another child—a baby boy with whom she immediately became obsessed. She had showered the little Lord Sylvester with nothing but love, and when his poor health came to light, she had attentively cared for him, assigning someone else to look after the archducal playroom in her stead.

Lady Veronica had only been young when she lost both her mother and brother. She believed that the Leisegangs had poisoned them, so when her darling son had finally been born, she had become extremely anxious about losing him too. It was for this reason that she had chosen me to attend to him. My time spent serving Lady Veronica, raising Lord Karstedt, and serving as Lady Georgine's head attendant had unintentionally given me experience in raising potential future archdukes, which had made me a very appropriate candidate for the role.

I cannot imagine how Lady Georgine felt when her head attendant was suddenly taken from her.

As a member of a branch family to the archducal family, I did not have a set lord or lady—my loyalty had always been to the ruling archduke, whether that was the current aub, his father, or his father before him. He would order me to serve whomever in the archducal

family was struggling to find an attendant. But perhaps, on that one occasion, I should have expressed more resistance.

“Mother, is something wrong?” came Justus’s voice. He had just stepped out of his hidden room with a box in his arms.

I slowly shook my head. “I am simply thinking that I should not have left Lady Georgine’s side all those years ago...”

“You’re still regretting that?” Justus asked flatly. “It wasn’t your fault, Mother; it’s your duty to serve whomever the aub chooses. The fault lies with Lady Veronica, who wanted your services, and the previous archduke, who accepted her request.”

I couldn’t help but give him a wry smile. “That professionalism is precisely why I thought you were so well suited for serving Aub Ehrenfest... You certainly did not follow my teachings growing up.”

Having been forced to leave Lady Georgine’s side, I had instructed my children to attend to her in my stead. Gudrun had agreed and ended up becoming Lady Georgine’s retainer, but Justus had refused, even going as far as to take the attendant course to avoid serving her.

A second opportunity had then presented itself when the previous archduke ordered Justus to serve Lord Ferdinand. I had rejoiced at the thought that he was obeying the aub, attending to those who needed servants for the sake of our duchy... but then he had given his name to Lord Ferdinand.

“Had I refused as you did and continued to serve Lady Georgine, then perhaps we would not be in this situation,” I said. “Lady Georgine and Lord Sylvester might have worked together to rule Ehrenfest and guide it down a brighter path.”

“Huh? That would have put Lord Ferdinand in an even worse position than he’s in now. Lady Veronica and Lady Georgine are alike in how violently they treat those who oppose them. I don’t even want to imagine what might have happened if they had both targeted him at once,” Justus replied, tearing apart my optimistic fantasy. “It’s not like you to get caught up in such fanciful notions, Mother. Who cares how Lady Georgine feels, anyway?”

I glared at him. “Justus, you need to be more—”

“Good grief... You certainly have it rough, Mother, having to switch whom you serve so often. You can only work for one person at a time, but you have to be considerate of all the lords and ladies you’ve ever served.” He took another box from his hidden room and stacked it in the corner. “Even now, Lady Georgine has enough allies to comfortably threaten Aub Ehrenfest. I can see it now—she’s plotting Lord Sylvester’s downfall with an excited glint in her eye, much like she did when they were younger.”

Once again, I was reminded that Justus’s perspective differed so greatly from my own. He no longer saw Lady Georgine as his

childhood friend, nor did he look back on their lost days together with any semblance of warmth.

“To you, Mother, Lady Georgine is a woman whom you once loyally served. To me, she is an enemy whom I must beat down and destroy. You are free to wallow in sentimentality, but I ask you—where do your priorities lie?”

I gave another wry smile as my son thrust reality in my face once again; despite his words, I could tell that he was unwilling to allow me even the smallest moment of nostalgia.

“I serve Aub Ehrenfest and Lady Rozemyne,” I said. “That hasn’t once slipped my mind.”

“Indeed. Lord Ferdinand is leaving for the sake of our duchy. In turn, we are leaving Lady Rozemyne to you.”

I was a little surprised to see Justus so concerned about someone other than Lord Ferdinand, but I hid those feelings beneath a reassuring smile. “Unlike those of you going to Ahrensbach, milady has her retainers, her family, and her fiancé to worry about her. She will not be lonely for long.”

“I’ll pray that turns out to be true...” Justus replied with a doubtful sigh.

I sighed as well. My son treasured his lord enough to have given him his name, so it was entirely understandable that he still resented Lord Sylvester and Lord Wilfried, who had been so lovingly doted on by Lady Veronica. At times, he even resented them for things that weren’t their fault—and while I was aware that this was simply how emotions worked, I always considered it tragic.

Lord Ferdinand is more important to Justus than anyone else, after all.

Back when Justus had given his name, he had cast aside his wife, his child—everything and everyone but his lord. He had a cold, ruthless side to his personality that wasn’t apparent from his relaxed appearance and demeanor, and he openly stated that he would renounce anything that might so much as inconvenience Lord Ferdinand.

In a sense, he was more like me than anyone else. I, too, had vowed to give up my entire life when I swore my loyalty to Ehrenfest.

The next day, I made the absolute most of the time off that Lady Florencia had given me and finished cleaning Justus’s room with maximum efficiency. Separated into neat piles were the luggage that he would be taking with him when he departed, his clothes for after winter, and the luggage that would be sent after Lord Ferdinand’s Starbinding, when he was no longer a guest in Ahrensbach.

“Whew. You have my thanks. That’s my mother for you.”

“Praise me all you want, but this is the most I am doing for you.

Good grief..."

My response had come out almost instinctively, but now silence hung in the air. I gazed up at Justus. Although it was possible that we would meet in the future—after all, I was Lady Rozemyne's attendant and he Lord Ferdinand's retainer—it was unlikely that we would ever speak as family again.

I need to think of something to say...

Despite my best efforts, nothing that felt appropriate for a last farewell came to mind. A simple "be careful" would not change my son's willingness to rush headlong into danger whenever he deemed it necessary for his goals. Ever since he was a child, not once had I actually seen him exercise caution.

In short, saying something out of worry is pointless.

My entire life was dedicated to the archduke, and Justus was leaving for Ahrensbach with the lord to whom he had given his name; the words normally exchanged between a mother and her son ill suited our situation.

After some thought, I straightened my back and took a deep breath. Justus must have noticed this because his goofy smile disappeared and he straightened up as well.

"Do not forget the vow you made," I said. "Do everything in your power to realize the will of the man to whom you gave your name."

"Understood. May our lives be spent for those we serve."

"...Indeed. For those we serve."

A small, proud smile arose on Justus's face. There was no doubt in my mind that he would remain wholly dedicated to his lord, living exactly as he wished. He was, without a shadow of a doubt, my son.

Memories and Farewells

“It has been the greatest honor to serve you.”

After saying my farewell to the High Priest—though he was now the High Priest no longer—I watched as he flew his highbeast back toward the Noble’s Quarter. Only once he and Lady Rozemyne’s group were gone did Zahm and I return to the High Priest’s chambers. There was much to do, even without our lord.

“Fran, how are the orphanage’s preparations coming along?” Lothar, the head attendant of the High Priest’s chambers, asked me upon our arrival. Getting each other up to date was the first thing we needed to do. The orphanage was planning to accept a great number of pre-baptism children this winter, and preparations were being made to that effect.

“We are progressing steadily with Wilma and Monika leading the effort, but winter preparations are our current priority,” I replied. “The problem is that we do not know how many children we are due to receive.”

We were unsure how many dishes or beds we would need, and neither Lady Rozemyne nor Lord Hartmut could tell whether we had enough clothes at the ready, since they did not know how tall or old the new orphans were going to be. We were fortunate in that we would not need to prepare bedding and food—that would apparently be delivered when the children arrived—but there was still the matter of the furniture and other daily necessities.

“This is quite the challenge...” Lothar said, narrowing his indigo eyes and scratching his light-brown hair—as he always did when deep in thought. “Lady Rozemyne says that she will provide anything we lack, but as these are noble children, we cannot use their bedding and dishes and such.”

It was then that Ymir—the youngest of all the attendants in the High Priest’s chambers, who had joined after I was reassigned to serve Lady Rozemyne—blinked in surprise. “Why is that?” he asked. “Would it not be most logical for them to bring what they already own?”

Lothar shook his head. “That runs the risk of a room in the orphanage being better equipped than the rooms of the blue priests.”

“Ah, I see. I would not want Brother Kampfner to have worse living conditions than the new orphans either...” Ymir said, slumping his shoulders.

Brother Kampfer was exceedingly diligent compared to his fellow blue priests; he not only completed his work with the utmost care, but also made sure he was on good terms with his attendants. Ymir saw him in an especially positive light, perhaps because he had gotten so used to accompanying him for the Dedication Ritual after Lady Rozemyne became the High Bishop. Still, amiable though Brother Kampfer was, his house was far from wealthy. That was why they allowed him only the bare minimum he needed to maintain his status as a blue priest and took everything else for themselves.

“There were times when the High Priest—or, rather, Lord Ferdinand—would send stern words to Brother Kampfer’s house... but Lord Hartmut acts only for Lady Rozemyne,” Ymir said, his voice tinged with worry. “Is Brother Kampfer going to be okay?”

I was once again reminded that I could no longer refer to the High Priest as such. This was much easier said than done, though. I had been taken as his attendant shortly after he was made the High Priest, and the fact that I needed to start calling him “Lord Ferdinand” felt both strange and deeply saddening.

“If we find out that his house is behaving exceptionally cruelly, then we need only tell Lord Hartmut that we wish for Lady Rozemyne to be informed,” I said. “He will most likely determine the matter as being beneath her and opt to scold them himself.”

“Oho... I see you are used to handling Lord Hartmut.”

“Lord Ferdinand informed me of many ways to deal with Lady Rozemyne’s retainers back when they first began visiting the temple.”

“Do tell us what you learned when we next have the time,” Lothar said, but there was no need for him to sound so impressed. I could only manage a dry chuckle as I recalled those tense earlier days when my attention had been dedicated almost entirely to not angering the visiting nobles.

“These methods involve going through Lady Rozemyne, so they may not be that practical for those of you working in the High Priest’s chambers,” I said. “If you wish for her to be mobilized, then please *discreetly* consult either Zahm or me, as we once consulted with Lord Ferdinand.”

“If we act too carelessly, then we will only earn Lord Hartmut’s ire,” Zahm added. “He is especially sensitive to Lady Rozemyne being used.”

Everyone responded with noises of understanding. I was sure that they were recalling Lord Hartmut sitting atop the blue priest he had restrained.

The atmosphere in the High Priest’s chambers was always a lot more relaxed without a lord present—and with Monika at the orphanage, we were all former attendants to Lord Ferdinand, myself

and Zahm included.

“Ymir, are the blue robes that Lord Hartmut ordered ready?” Lothar asked.

Those in the High Bishop’s chambers often focused on winter preparations and coordinating with the lower city, but here, the Dedication Ritual took priority. Lord Hartmut was still in his very early days as the new High Priest; we could not risk his first Dedication Ritual ending in failure.

That said, with Lord Ferdinand and Brother Egmont leaving the temple and Lady Rozemyne not returning for winter, we had very few blue priests at hand. Lord Hartmut had asked Lord Cornelius, Lady Rozemyne’s brother by blood, to help compensate for the shortage, as well as Lord Damuel and Lady Angelica. Ymir was apparently in the process of preparing blue robes for their sake.

“I am not quite finished with them,” Ymir replied. “I, um... do not know much about the ceremonial robes of the blue shrine maidens, so...”

“In that case, we must hurry to find ceremonial robes for Lord Cornelius, Lord Damuel, and Lady Angelica... Fran, Ymir, let us go to the storage room. Everyone else, continue with your work as usual.”

“You wish for me to join you?” I asked. It made sense for him to ask Ymir, since he usually assisted with such preparations anyway, but I failed to see why he would want my help.

Lothar gave a small smile. “You have a similar build to Lord Damuel, I to Lord Cornelius, and Ymir to Lady Angelica. Are we not the perfect trio?”

“I see,” I replied.

Ymir shook his head in protest. “I’m a man. My build is nothing like Lady Angelica’s.”

“You are just a bit taller and on the thinner side, but you should suffice for us to get some rough measurements.”

“Take that back! You’re hurting my feelings!”

We exited the High Priest’s chambers with Ymir, who was still clearly wounded, then headed to the storage room where the blue robes were kept. The everyday clothes were folded and put on shelves along with their accompanying ornaments, while the ceremonial robes were hung up to keep them from creasing. Closest to the door were the ceremonial robes that Lord Ferdinand had used to wear. Seeing them reminded me that he truly was gone.

In stark contrast to my sentimentality, Lothar was rifling through the robes with an entirely businesslike demeanor. “Lord Ferdinand’s robes are too large for Lord Cornelius. We do not have time to hem them, let alone measure him for more significant alterations. Come, help me search for something that may be a more appropriate size.

Fran, do you believe that Lord Ferdinand's ceremonial robes would fit you?"

I reached toward the robes, intending to hold them up to myself to check, but my hand stopped short. Something about touching the limp, empty robes just felt wrong.

"Lord Ferdinand is tall enough that I cannot imagine them fitting me," I eventually said. "More importantly, the robes of an archducal family member would not suit a laynoble such as Damuel."

"Ah. I did not consider problems of status. Do you know each of their ranks?"

"Lord Cornelius is an archnoble, Lady Angelica a mednoble, and Lord Damuel a laynoble," I said. The circumstances were urgent enough that they probably would not have complained, but as we were dealing with nobles, it was crucial that we take every precaution.

"Let us settle on the archnoble's clothes first. Then, we can search for outfits that are less extravagant in comparison," Lothar replied. He was evidently less concerned about status when lending robes to Lord Hartmut, which immediately made me feel uneasy. I remembered Lord Hartmut kicking up a fuss over the furniture in the orphanage director's chambers not suiting Lady Rozemyne.

"On what basis did you select Lord Hartmut's ceremonial robes?" I asked. "Did he say nothing of status?"

"He did not," Ymir replied. "Perhaps he simply did not mind, as he will only be wearing them once. In fact, Lord Hartmut rarely expresses dissatisfaction about anything. He is also very easy to serve, since he commutes from the Noble's Quarter."

"I wonder about that..." Lothar interjected, crossing his arms. "He may be staying in the temple for extended periods in the near future, namely when Lady Rozemyne is here. Lord Ferdinand also began by commuting from the Noble's Quarter."

"He did...?" I asked, blinking in surprise. Ymir likewise indicated that this was his first time hearing such news.

"Oh, of course. I suppose I am the only one who was serving as his attendant from his very first day in the temple..." Lothar remarked, scratching his light-brown hair and seeming a bit solemn.

I had joined the High Priest's chambers around the time that apprentice blue priests and shrine maidens were leaving the temple one after another. We had always been busy with the ever-increasing workload, and only now did it occur to me that we never spoke about the past.

"If you were unaware of that, then you may not know this either," Lothar continued. "Lord Ferdinand hardly did any work at all when he first joined the temple as a blue priest."

"What?!" Ymir exclaimed.

Lothar could not help but smile at this response. In truth, Lady Rozemyne had already told me about Lord Ferdinand having had more time to brew and read before he became the High Priest, but hearing it from another attendant made it somehow feel new.

“At the start, he took only two attendants,” Lothar explained. “He hired a chef so that those beneath him could eat, but he would return to his estate in the Noble’s Quarter for every meal—even lunch.”

“He went all the way to the Noble’s Quarter for lunch?” I asked. Again, this was news to me. It must have been troublesome for him to fly there every day at fourth bell. I had to wonder whether he had a lot of work to do at the castle even then.

As I was contemplating this unusual revelation, Lothar lowered his voice and said, “He did so because he anticipated that the High Bishop would attempt to poison him.”

“I knew they were on bad terms but... poison?”

It had been clear to those of us serving Lord Ferdinand that he and the late High Bishop did not get along well, but we had never feared a poisoning attempt. In fact, the two were entirely uninvolved with each other outside of work and the distribution of money.

“Indeed,” Lothar said. “I was surprised when I first heard this, but it seems that nobles must expect to be poisoned at all times. Lord Ferdinand even went as far as to warn us temple attendants that we would be at risk unless we built up a resistance of some kind. How could we not be on guard after that? The food prepared in the temple kitchen was thus eaten not by Lord Ferdinand, but by the chef, us attendants, and those in the orphanage.”

Lothar went on to explain that he had once witnessed a gray shrine maiden steal into the kitchen in the High Priest’s chambers and attempt to sneak something onto one of the plates. He had ensured that she was swiftly captured.

“I reported the incident to Lord Ferdinand, who said that he would interrogate the gray shrine maiden himself. I did not see what he said or did to her, as I was told to use that time to eat lunch, but she emerged with vacant eyes. And then, that night, there was chaos in the High Bishop’s chambers—someone had poisoned his food.”

“That must have been Lord Ferdinand taking his revenge,” Ymir said, his lips curling as he fought back the urge to laugh. “How did the High Bishop fare?”

Lothar smirked. “Everyone in his chambers was bedridden for three days with intense stomach pain.”

It was easy to imagine the late High Bishop angrily stamping his feet while Lord Ferdinand listened impassively. We had all found the High Bishop a source of constant frustration, so tales of his suffering filled us with vicarious delight. After all, the man had received his just

deserts.

I picked up a set of ceremonial robes, trying to hide the smile that had risen to my face. The clothes must have belonged to someone from a high-status household, for their designs were excellent and their material pleasant to the touch.

“Perhaps this will do,” I said. “I believe it would suit an archnoble.”

“Excellent,” Lothar replied. “The hem and sash can easily be adjusted.”

We had decided on Lord Cornelius’s ceremonial robes. Next, we would need to find some for Lady Angelica.

“So, what happened next?” Ymir asked, unable to mask the excitement in his voice, while holding the ceremonial robes of various blue shrine maidens up to his chest. “I cannot imagine that Bezewanst, of all people, would concede so easily.”

“Naturally, he barged in on Lord Ferdinand upon recovering. We were all quite afraid, but Lord Ferdinand greeted his anger with an expression of exaggerated surprise.”

Once the High Bishop had finished ranting about his own poison being used against him, Lord Ferdinand had merely given him a curious look and said, “I do not see what there is to complain about; I even had the poison you attempted to feed me mixed into a jar, drastically reducing its toxicity. I did not think that the younger brother of a first wife would be so unaccustomed to poison. You speak often of your connection to the archducal family, so I suppose I must assist you in preparing for what that connection entails.”

The late High Bishop had retreated shortly thereafter, understanding that Lord Ferdinand was threatening to poison him again.

Ymir shuddered. “I do not even want to imagine Lord Ferdinand saying something like that to me with a flat expression. I would be so scared that I would truly wish to cry.”

“Indeed. The blue priests were similarly terrified when the High Bishop explained the situation to them, and from that point on, attendants could no longer be sent to the kitchens of others. Kitchens were guarded more carefully than ever before, and that was the end of poison incidents in the temple.”

This had all taken place when I was serving Sister Margaret, the orphanage director at the time. I had lived in the orphanage director’s chambers, which were a good distance from the noble section of the temple, so word of this poisoning incident had never reached my ears.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I noticed that Sister Margaret’s ceremonial robes were spread out before me, colorful and embroidered with flowers. The very sight caused so many old

memories to resurface, and my teeth were chattering before I knew it.

I've come so far. I'm even able to enter the hidden room in the orphanage director's chambers. So... why now, after all this time?

I clenched my fists. It was like someone had reached out and grabbed me by the heart, and each shallow breath seemed to catch in my throat. I had truly believed that I was over my tragic past, but the memories were carved so deeply into my mind that they were far from gone.

As I returned my attention to my surroundings, I saw that Lothar was holding those very robes up to Ymir's chest. "Is this flower embroidery not cute and feminine?" he asked.

"Lothar, are you doing this on purpose?" Ymir said in response, a sudden harshness to his light-blue eyes.

I got between them and started acting as the mediator, though my true intention was just to get the robes out of my sight. They were about Ymir's size, and as Sister Margaret had been a mednoble herself, they were appropriate enough for Lady Angelica... but I simply could not bear to see her wear them.

"Please calm down, both of you," I said. "Ymir, Lady Angelica is not particularly fond of such feminine designs. Please make your selection based on size and status. Lothar, you are teasing him a little too much. Put these robes away, if you will."

"My apologies. At once."

I gave a quiet, relieved sigh as Lothar took Sister Margaret's robes away, then picked up a more subdued outfit and held it up to Ymir. "How about this?"

"I personally think the floral design would better accentuate Lady Angelica's beauty..." Lothar said, looking regretfully back at Sister Margaret's robes.

Ymir similarly fell into thought. It was seeming more and more likely that Lady Angelica would end up wearing Sister Margaret's ceremonial robes. Desperate to avoid that outcome, I started comparing the two women's figures in my mind.

"Lothar, Ymir, look carefully. The bust would not fit Lady Angelica properly. These other robes would match her better."

"I see," Ymir said. "I did not consider that. We will use the other robes, then."

"Fran! Ymir!" Lothar exclaimed, sounding indignant. I had successfully prevented Sister Margaret's robes from being used, but now he was eyeing me carefully. He must have found my behavior suspicious. I returned the focus of our conversation to Lord Ferdinand in an attempt to distract him.

"So, when did Lord Ferdinand actually start living in the temple? Was that poison incident responsible?"

“Let me see... It was to observe the former High Bishop and the temple in general, from what I remember,” Lothar replied, going along with the change in subject. “Lord Ferdinand would say that he risked encountering someone troublesome in his noble estate, so he began staying here instead. At the time, I assumed that it was a lie to keep us from worrying about him... but now I believe it was a means for him to escape Lord Sylvester.”

“That does seem likely...” I replied. It was just like Lord Ferdinand to give some fitting excuse for keeping a close eye on those around him, though this was a very believable exception.

When was it that a mysterious noble had suddenly begun appearing at the temple, followed shortly after by any number of ordonnanzes that said, “Sylvester, where in the world are you?” When was it that I had worked out that Lord Sylvester was in fact the archduke, and that these ordonnanzes had come from his guard knight, Lord Karstedt? At this point, I struggled to remember.

“I believe these will suit Lord Damuel, no?” Lothar asked.

“He is surprisingly muscular, so perhaps these will be a better fit,” I replied. Lord Damuel was of average height for a noble, so there were more robes here that were about his size. I selected some of a slightly lower quality than those we had chosen for Lord Cornelius and Lady Angelica, then moved on to searching for sashes, cords, and such to complete the outfits.

“Why do women’s sashes come in so many widths and with such varying decoration?” Ymir asked. “I have no idea which one to pick.”

“Let us pick ones similar to Lady Rozemyne’s in design so that Nicola and Monika have an easier time helping Lady Angelica dress,” I said, then indicated several potential options. “Any of these will do nicely.”

Ymir looked visibly relieved. “I have only ever served the High Priest, so I would not have been able to put together an outfit for a blue shrine maiden on my own.”

“Well, this should suffice.”

I exhaled once we had all the sashes, cords, and such that we needed. But while I was feeling at ease over a job well done, Ymir looked conflicted, as though there was something he wished to say.

“Is something the matter, Ymir?” I asked.

“Well... is Lord Hartmut, um... serious about this? I do not know about having guard knights assist with the ceremony...”

“It is precisely *because* he is serious that he has ordered us to prepare ceremonial robes.”

I had seen Lord Hartmut asking Lord Cornelius and the others for their assistance in the High Bishop’s chambers, and when I conveyed what I had heard, Ymir furrowed his brow in displeasure. “Does that

not mean the guard knights will be participating in the Dedication Ritual without having performed the fealty ceremony?" he asked. "Lord Hartmut carried out his when taking his place as the High Priest, but they have not carried out theirs."

"That will most likely be the case, yes. I have not heard of any knights simultaneously serving as blue priests."

"Will that even be permitted...? Guard knights have thus far been forbidden from entering the ceremony hall, but now they're being allowed to simply because they have blue robes? I think we should at least have them perform the fealty ceremony and double as blue priests."

In truth, Ymir was not the only one feeling unsure about how nobles from outside the temple were participating in the Dedication Ritual; I, too, was quite hesitant. Lord Hartmut was making so many considerations so that Lady Rozemyne could remain at the Royal Academy for an entire term, but I personally would have preferred that she return.

Our musings were cut short as Lothar brought us back with a loud clap. "I understand how you feel, Ymir, but our priority here is to perform the Dedication Ritual as best we can and ensure that the chalices are filled with mana. A weaker harvest throughout the duchy will mean less taxes paid during the Harvest Festival. Let us just be grateful that the nobility is being so thoroughly cooperative."

Lothar was correct—a lack of mana for the Dedication Ritual would negatively impact everyone, ourselves included. Such decisions made by the High Bishop and the High Priest were not to be argued with.

"Furthermore, Lord Ferdinand agreed with Lord Hartmut's suggestion."

"He did...?"

Lord Ferdinand was normally so adamant about operating within the rules... yet here he was, going back on his own guiding beliefs so that Lady Rozemyne would not need to return to Ehrenfest. This realization made me feel unusually warm inside.

"Lord Ferdinand certainly has grown softer..." I muttered.

Lothar smiled and nodded. "It is all thanks to Lady Rozemyne. I was surprised to see him, of all people, heed the words of that young child so carefully and make so many arrangements for her."

"Indeed," Ymir added. "I recall thinking that Lady Rozemyne was quite something—she never faltered beneath his cold glare, and she came up with one solution after another each time she was scolded, never once giving up on her desires."

I could not help but chuckle at his evaluation.

"It certainly was Lady Rozemyne who brought about this change

in Lord Ferdinand,” Lothar said, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. “We attendants were stricken with fear at the thought of us needing to return to the orphanage, and we did all that we could to read Lord Ferdinand and guess his intentions. Lady Rozemyne, in contrast, fought to make her own feelings heard. Perhaps that is what separates us?”

I could still remember how infuriated and exasperated Lady Rozemyne had been when she had failed to understand Lord Ferdinand’s intentions.

“There is doubtless some truth to that,” I said, “but perhaps her being so unpredictable also factored into it. Her speech and actions seldom conform to the logic of nobles or the temple. That surely forced Lord Ferdinand to observe her so closely.”

After learning that Lady Rozemyne did not understand the more indirect language that nobles used, Lord Ferdinand had started interacting with her in increasingly blunt and direct ways. It had even reached a point where, back in her days as a blue shrine maiden, Lady Rozemyne had come to associate Lord Ferdinand’s hidden room with long and criticizing lectures.

I wonder when Lord Ferdinand went from grumbling about her antics to treating her with such care... It was such a gradual change that I cannot quite pinpoint it.

“As of late, she has seemed particularly hesitant about the handover process,” Lothar noted. “I was surprised to see how suddenly the distance between them closed.”

“I was more surprised that Lord Ferdinand accepted it without even trying to rebuke her,” Ymir added. “He did not call her a bother, nor did he pick her up and toss her out of his chambers for being too annoying.” We all chuckled as we recalled just how much he had treated her like a pest at times.

“It seemed to me that Lord Ferdinand was not used to being considered an equal, where one would act with concern for him, and he would act with concern for them in turn. I sometimes saw him deep in thought.”

“I’ll never forget Lady Rozemyne rampaging around, doing everything in her power to make the High Priest understand that there are people who care about him,” Ymir said. Lothar put a hand over his mouth to keep back his laughter, and it wasn’t long before I was doing the same.

Everyone saw it all, Lady Rozemyne.

That said, I saw Lady Rozemyne’s actions as less of a rampage, and more of a desperate attempt to get through to Lord Ferdinand. She had spoken as directly and as freely as someone who had no worries that their feelings might be rebuffed, and with such careful

consideration. It was identical to how she interacted with her family in the lower city.

If only Lord Ferdinand had changed sooner—perhaps then Lady Rozemyne would not have cried alone after being forbidden from meeting with her lower-city associates in her hidden room. And if their warm, caring relationship had been given room to grow further, perhaps Lord Ferdinand would have one day come to express his emotions honestly instead of disregarding them entirely.

O Goddess of Time Dregarnuhr, I pray that you undo the present. Take us back to before those two were separated...

But no matter how much I prayed, my wish would not be granted.

I was also aware that this change between them had come about precisely because their separation had been decided. Going back in time would only reestablish the distance that had once kept them at arm's length of each other. I knew all this, but after seeing how far they had come, I could not help but feel frustrated that it had all ended so soon.

"We have all we need for the ritual," Lothar said. "We may now depart."

I picked up the full ceremonial outfit we had chosen for Lord Damuel and then went to leave. As I turned toward the exit, however, I spotted Lord Ferdinand's ceremonial robes still hanging by the door.

"Fran, is something wrong?"

"I still cannot believe that Lord Ferdinand's ceremonial robes are here..." I said, feeling a profound sense of sorrow as I gazed upon them. Lothar and Ymir looked at them as well, and for a while, we remained completely silent. They were likely feeling a similar melancholy.

"Or that Lady Rozemyne will only be in the temple for a few more years..." Lothar suddenly added. It had already been decided that she would move on from the temple upon coming of age; perhaps we would experience this same sadness then as well. The very thought of that departure ate away at me until my heart felt strangely hollow. It was like a depressing cloud hung over me.

"Am I going to be left alone again, I wonder...?" I mused aloud. As a gray priest, there was no place for me but the temple. Lord Ferdinand had already left me behind, and it was inevitable that Lady Rozemyne would one day do the same. It surprised me how much that frustrated me. This was my first time learning that I had these feelings at all.

I had felt no sadness when Sister Margaret went—only a deep sense of relief. Yet now the mere thought of losing those whom I served made my heart ache. I, too, had changed a lot.

"Personally, I would rather stay here in the temple, even if Lord

Ferdinand asked me to leave,” Ymir said. “The outside world is too scary.”

Lothar agreed, and the two of them went on ahead.

If Lord Ferdinand or Lady Rozemyne wished it, I would accompany them to an entirely new world...

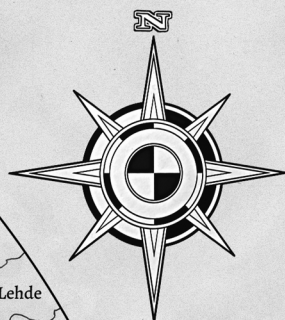
I swore that in my heart and knelt once more before Lord Ferdinand’s ceremonial robes.



(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management

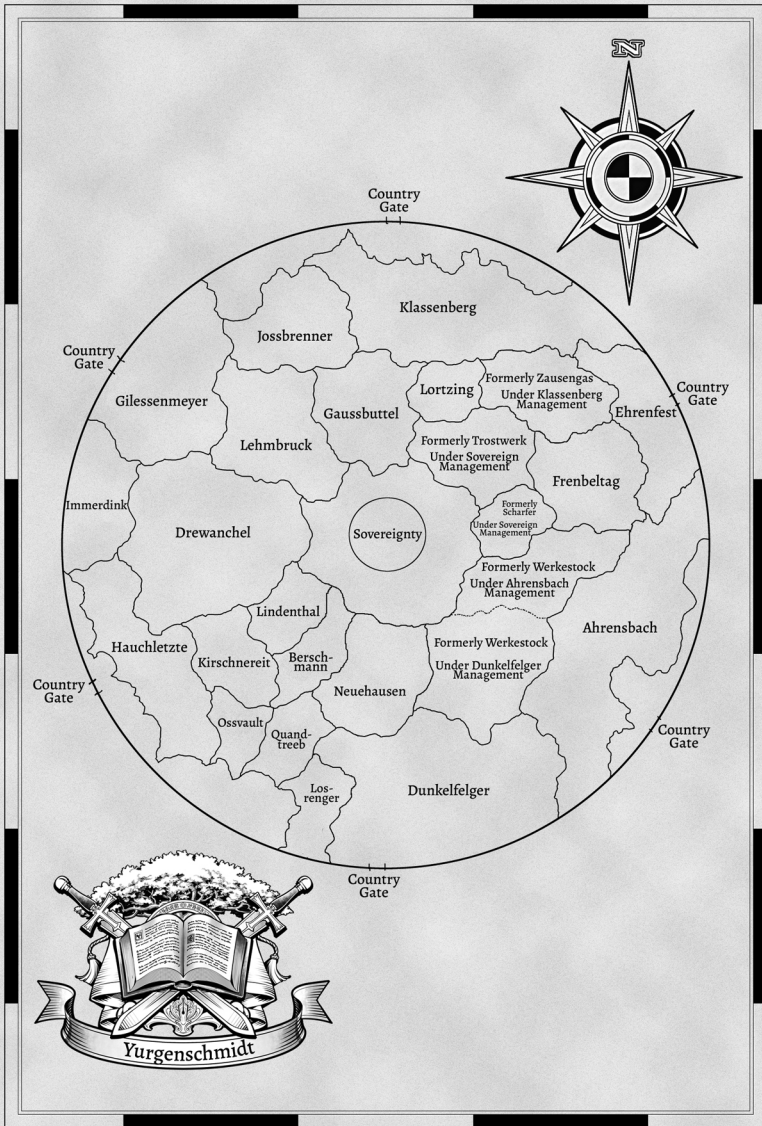
Frenbeltaag Border Gate

★
Ehrenfest
Central District



Country
Border Gate

Ahrensbach Border Gate



Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Volume 9*. This marks the conclusion of Part 4.

The prologue begins with Florencia watching Georgine's group leave Ehrenfest. She, too, found the presence of Ahrensbach's first wife discomfiting.

Florencia wished to stay in close contact with her children, but the fact that they lived apart from her in the northern building and all moved with their retainers made this easier said than done. It became exceedingly hard for her to get a full grasp on the situation, as the updates she received from her children were at times contradictory, and she had few opportunities to speak with Rozemyne, despite receiving her reports from Sylvester.

Naturally, Rozemyne had no way of knowing that Florencia was suffering—she was too preoccupied with the handover process in the temple and with studying for the Royal Academy. Still, she assisted Ferdinand in preparing for his departure and thought about their farewells...

In a surprising turn of events, Rozemyne and Ferdinand ended up giving each other charms during their farewell meal, which they attended with their retainers. The rainbow feystones they harvested from the regisches proved very useful indeed.

Unfortunately, their excitement after exchanging such wonderful gifts only lasted a brief while; someone infiltrated the temple while they were gone, kidnapped several of the gray priests, and stole the duchy's bible. The matter is resolved thanks to the diligence of their retainers and some cooperation from the lower city, but Ferdinand ends up having to leave Ehrenfest even earlier than expected. Rozemyne fights back her tears as she gives him one last blessing with all the elements, and with that, Ferdinand departs for Ahrensbach.

After the epilogue, this volume transitions into a collection of short stories entitled "The Beginning of a Winter Apart." I wrote these as per reader requests gathered to celebrate us reaching the end of another part. They focus on how the lives of certain characters have changed with Ferdinand and the others leaving.

Two newly written short stories are told from Rihyarda's and Fran's perspectives.

In Rihyarda's story, I included some reminiscing about the past while she helped Justus to prepare for his departure. These two tend to be carrying out their duties as attendants whenever they appear in the main story, and they certainly don't exude the same "family" vibe as other characters. I want to believe that this little encounter in their estate served to reinforce their relationship as mother and son.

Fran's story was about preparing for the Dedication Ritual. Now that Ferdinand is gone, the High Priest's chambers remain largely empty while nobles get ready for winter socializing. Fran prepares ceremonial robes for the guard knights due to assist with the ritual, with the aid of two other priests. I really enjoyed the opportunity to expand on the attendants working in the High Priest's chambers. Lothar has popped up before, but this was Ymir's first appearance.

Letizia received a wonderful design by Shiina-sama in this volume. She's an Ahrensbach archduke candidate who will be taught by Ferdinand moving forward. Her family environment is exceedingly tragic.

This volume had more original content than usual, including the chapters "Rewarding Hartmut's Hard Work" and "Irreplaceable." Hopefully, readers of the web novel found them particularly entertaining and enlightening to read.

The cover art for this volume focuses on the wistful departure. Ferdinand and Rozemyne are both such a mixture of emotions as they say their last farewells. Amusingly, Eckhart and Justus are there as well, but they're hidden behind the title card. Be sure to look out for them in the title-less version within this very book.

For the color illustration, I requested the scene where Ferdinand gives Rozemyne the key. I kind of visualized them being surrounded by a huge crowd, but Shiina-sama said the scene looked so much prettier with just the two of them. It's like they're in their own little world. (Haha.)

Shiina-sama, thank you as always.

And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 1.

October 2019, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...

END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

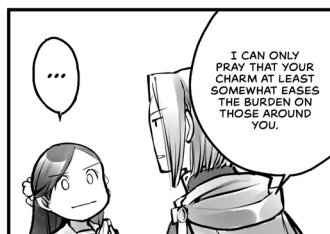
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You Shiina

WITH THAT,
ROZEMYNE
BEGAN
TO FEAR
FOR THE
TEMPLE'S
FUTURE.

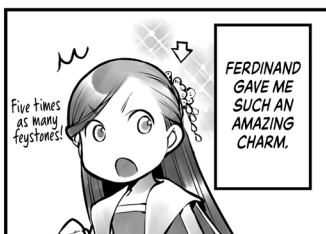
GEEZ,
I CAN'T
TELL
WHO'S
THE BAD
GUY
HERE.

WELCOME
BACK, LADY
ROZEMYNE.



I CAN ONLY
PRAY THAT YOUR
CHARM AT LEAST
SOMEWHAT EASES
THE BURDEN ON
THOSE AROUND
YOU.

WORDS
TO
REMEMBER



FERDINAND
GAVE ME
SUCH AN
AMAZING
CHARM.

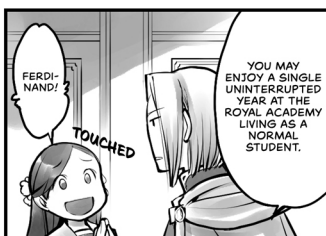


WELL, THE
LINE YOU
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WOULD
COUNT AS A
PROPOSAL...

YOU'RE SO
HOPELESS
WHEN IT
COMES TO
WOMEN'S
FEELINGS!

WHY
BOTHR
LYING?

SERIOUSLY?!
YOU SHOULD
HAVE SAID
SOMETHING
LIKE, "I GAVE
YOU THAT
CHARM SO YOU
CAN ALWAYS
FEEL SAFE,"
EVEN IF THAT
ISN'T TRUE!

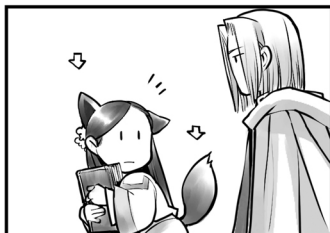


FERDINAND!

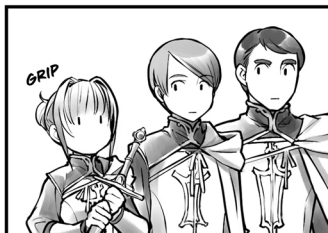
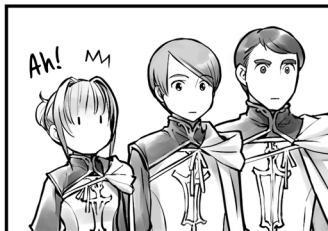
TOUCHED

YOU MAY
ENJOY A SINGLE
UNINTERRUPTED
YEAR AT THE
ROYAL ACADEMY
LIVING AS A
NORMAL
STUDENT.

I'M NOT A DOG



LEAVE IT TO THE SMART ONES









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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Founder of the Royal
Academy's So-Called Library Committee Volume 9
by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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